Despite the justifiable skepticism about its crowdsourcing attempts, in April 2010, the Obama Administration advertised what appeared to be a desire for meaningful citizen participation on the website of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS). Across an image of the White House ran the words: “Join the conversation on the future of science.” A smaller headline below the photo called out, “The White House wants to hear from you.”

“The Fully Open Government” Grand Challenge

The essence of the call for participation was that, as part of its effort to “introduce fully open government,” the White House sought to “draw on the collective wisdom of scientists everywhere” in order to formulate policy for potential scientific and technological Grand Challenges. The scheme through which these new ideas were to be gathered was Expert Labs, a nonprofit, “nonpartisan” venture set up by AAAS, an organization designed to promote cooperation among scientists, following discussions with the White House Office of Science & Technology Policy.

Grand Challenges was positioned to be the Obama Administration’s most ambitious crowdsourcing experiment yet. Unlike the Citizen’s Briefing Book (CBB) and the White House Online Town Hall, the Grand Challenges campaign had a more specific task and audience: it sought to involve citizens in determining which scientific and technological challenges “should be the focus of policy initiatives” in the years ahead. Furthermore, it claimed to offer direct citizen input in policy-making, the dream of millions of Obama supporters.

The invitation to “join the conversation” came four months after the Obama Administration issued its memorandum to create more “open and transparent government” and to promote citizen participation in government decision-making. The
Administration began to expand the availability of Internet tools and social media on government websites and sought to make available an array of new government information, through the recently created online Federal Register.\(^2\) Now, anyone with a computer could go to the new public website, data.gov, and find such previously hard-to-locate government data as job-related deaths, flight delays, and government notices. These actions were part of an attempt to create what then-Chief Information Officer Vivek Kundra called a “culture of accountability.”\(^3\)

Although Expert Labs technically was not a government project, the White House nevertheless embraced the Grand Challenges initiative. The White House’s posting on the AAAS website (and a similarly worded AAAS news release)\(^4\) reflected how the Administration attempted to position the Grand Challenges campaign as part of its Open Government plan.

At the heart of Expert Labs was Anil Dash, cofounder of Six Apart Ltd., the maker of the popular blogging software program known as Movable Type. The Office of Science & Technology Policy reached out to Dash to direct Expert Labs after officials read his August 2009 blog naming the federal government as “the most interesting new tech startup of 2009.”\(^5\)

“To know that the White House read what I said and was actually listening, that in itself is much more motivating than a million other things—like money or building something really cool,” Dash told the *New York Observer*.\(^6\)

AAAS, publisher of the journal *Science*, set up Expert Labs in November 2009 to support “policy crowdsourcing efforts in the executive branch of the U.S. government.” The initiative was backed by a $500,000 grant from the Chicago-based John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, known for its “genius grants.” When the Grand Challenges project was launched, AAAS Chief Executive Alan I. Leshner declared that “opening government up to a broad array of expertise” was no more than the “next logical step in improving American policy-making.”\(^7\) Dash put it more wryly, commenting, “All of us together are smarter than any one of us alone.”\(^8\)

Dash boasted to the *New York Observer* that “the government is already using technology to talk to citizens, but we’re going to make technology that helps government listen to them.” He said Expert Labs would “borrow developers from the hallways of Google in Silicon Valley or start-ups like Foursquare in New York to build government applications and social media tools in exchange for grants, and the chance to connect with some of the most powerful people in the country.”\(^9\)

Grand Challenges had an additional function: it allowed Expert Labs to conduct “alpha testing” of its new crowdsourcing tool, ThinkTank. In an interview with *techPresident* blogger Nancy Scola, Dash speculated on the potential benefits of using ThinkTank to collect ideas from the crowd via Twitter and Facebook. “Maybe instead of working from a set of a few hundred ideas, maybe 100,000 people will have a response…an answer,” he said. “And Expert Labs can provide the technology to collect those answers, give policy-makers tools to filter them out, and we can publish the responses for anyone in the public to analyze.”\(^10\)

These words reinforced the idea that the collected submissions would be used to inform policy. Nevertheless, in a June 2011 interview, Dash disabused us of the notion that the purpose of Grand Challenges was to produce governmental policy.\(^11\)