IQ

Political Activism in a Digital World

Interbrand IQ: The Political Issue

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We have seen a lot of evolution since Brown's experiment. Howard Dean's 2003 ground-breaking presidential primary campaign pushed digital activism into the spotlight when he used the web to not only raise a record-smashing $20 million online, but also employed a then little-known website called MeetUp. com to organize and galvanize supporters. Dean's successes propelled the small state governor onto the national stage.

While Dean's campaign eventually flamed out, he stood as the model for leveraging digital in political campaigns. During the general election Senator Kerry would go on to raise $82 million online. President Bush relied on the web mostly for organizing rather than fundraising, yet would still raise $14 million for his campaign that year.

Today digital platforms are used across the full spectrum of online activism. From local political campaigns to dynamic global social movements, digital is playing a part, although to varying degrees of success. As Malcolm Gladwell astutely noted in 2010, digital networks aren't always the best tool for binding committed social movers to a cause. While networks are resilient and adaptive, he says, they tend to lack the clear strategies, hierarchy and strong ties that power committed social movements (that often require supporters to risk personal harm or sacrifice).

It's important to note that supporters can engage a campaign through numerous entry points. What digital networks may lack in strong ties, they make up in awareness, participation, fundraising and organizing – and can act as the on-ramp for new committed supporters that seek stronger ties. Digital activism may not adequately prepare a supporter to stoically sit at a 1960 whites-only lunch counter, but the brand can still offer clear utility to engage.

In order to best leverage digital tools and platforms, the online experience must engage a supporter in two fundamental ways. First, the medium and the message must be **authentic** to

the movement's (sometimes nascent) brand and fit the larger narrative. This is often achieved through employing an operative language that makes sense to the local supporters, but also offers them something of value, like inside information, a perceived proximity to the seat of power, or simply being able to connect with previously unknown affinity groups.

The second key factor is that the digital experience either **fits current human behavior**, or **changes behavior** in a way that creates a rewarding experience. Digital tactics that comfortably fit the previous habit of supports – e.g. tweeting daily events – will be more readily picked up and appreciated by supporters if they don't require learning a new system – or worse, using a platform or tool without a strategy and simply because others are using it. Digital tactics that promote a change of behavior, for example readily offering up personal information on Facebook for sharing, often amplify some pre-existing behavior or desire.

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

One movement that has done well in the digital medium is the Tea Party, a disparate confederation of smaller groups in the conservative/libertarian territory of the American political landscape. What began as a populist movement (with some help) has enabled Tea Partiers to catch and even surpass the digital footprint of some contemporary political groups on both sides of the aisle. In 2007 The Tea Party set an online fundraising record with a one-day $6.5 million "money bomb."

By 2009, the Tea Party federation was sponsoring political candidates and exerting significant influence on the electoral landscape, supported by an online engagement, organizing, fundraising and training apparatus. The group itself has developed and embraced an authentic experience – including language, symbols and behaviors – that resonate with current and prospective members of the Tea Party.

Elsewhere on the political landscape, the Occupy Wall Street movement relied on advocacy and mobilization around an authentic shared experience that marks both movements and political campaigns. The OWS message flowed across digital touchpoints in a way corporate brands would envy.

Starting from an email and website connected to the Canadian publication AdBusters, it was picked up by independent American activists, was amplified on blogs, then to YouTube videos and Facebook pages before it was finally picked up by the mainstream media. Ultimately, though, the OWS movement seemed to have fallen prey to Gladwell's social media criticisms about a lack of a strategy and hierarchy. The organic nature of OWS that was once invigorating and inspiring now leaves the group on a mild simmer and largely absent from the current political conversation.

OWS itself was "inspired by popular uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia," highlighting not only how local movements can be energized by social media, but the responsiveness and reaction of political activism around the world. Zeynep Tufekci says Arab Spring activists "RSVP'd to a revolution," explaining that "Twitter changed the world by allowing people in a repressive environment to know how many other people are feeling like you."

Connecting with like-minded people is at the heart of brands. That connection can happen with increased velocity and be amplified on digital platforms. The sense during the Arab Spring that "you are not alone" encouraged engagement and hope. Social media did not in itself create the "strong-ties" of these movements, but instead alerted people to other supports to be tied to. (And generated lots of attention from the West.) Again, the authentically shared experience was about movement from a certain anonymous hopelessness, to realizing there were others out there suffering and looking for change.

The much-publicized Kony 2012 raised interest through a visceral campaign, but one that ultimately resulted in limited payoff from activists, the so-called "Liketavism", one of the clearest examples of Gladwell's "weak tie" critique. As a further illustration of how the amplification power of the internet cuts both ways, the Kony film producers later had to fend off questions about possible fraud at their film company that spread around the web.

For these social movements, digital was used to engage activists around presence, organizing, fundraising and training, couched in an authentic experience that fit the way people either engaged already, or were looking to engage. As we see in the OWS example, what digital is not good at is facilitating the determination of strategy. For this the political campaigns

have an advantage because a hierarchy is still handing down those decisions and pushing the messages out to the media and downhill to supporters.

POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS

President Obama's first presidential election used the web to rapidly spread awareness and formed an exciting community that empowered volunteers and raised $500 million, the majority from small donations. This time around, Obama has had to change his strategy for digital. Now Obama is using digital to reactivate a support base that appears to be overcoming its initial reticence, largely by empowering them more than any group of political supporters have ever been before.

According to Stephanie Cutter from Obama for America:

"We designed our new app to help break down the distinction between online and offline organizing, giving every supporter the same opportunities to get involved that they would find in a field office."

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Governor Romney, however, has had more limited success on the digital front. Like his Republican forerunner George W. Bush who wanted to "catapult the propaganda," Romney sought to connect authentically with his supporters through a disdain for the mainstream news media. Romney's campaign released the "Mitt's VP" app that was designed to attract his die-hard supporters with promises of being the first to know.

In terms of message, this app was about as authentic as they come. But apps that offer a one-time, limited feature-set like "Mitt's VP" (though you could also donate), lack a sustainable relevancy to maintain an on-going engagement necessary to solidify a relationship. As was widely predicted, the media learned of Paul Ryan's selection and leaked the info before it landed on the app, essentially nullifying the app's promise to supporters.

While Obama and Romney diverge on a great many issues, they do share something in common. Regardless of how sophisticated they are in their use of digital media, they both still apply a mostly top-down communications style.

As mentioned, we are in an age when brand managers and supporters/customers co-create brands together. In the case of this presidential campaign much of the engagement is between fellow supporters, and not with the campaigns or candidates themselves.

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Both candidates are missing an opportunity to boost engagement in what is described as a "base election" to really connect with supporters through humanized interactions. They could be encouraging conversation on social platforms, rather than just talking at people.

Perhaps the deeper, engaging political leadership model is a possibility for future political campaigns. It's certainly more feasible in local campaigns and movements where interaction is likely to be more authentic and fit local behaviors. At the national level Obama made a brief foray into this digital territory when he did a Q&A on the social news website Reddit. Illustrating the passion for this level of engagement, Obama's Q&A traffic crashed the site.

Barriers certainly exist for closely connecting voters and supporters with the politicians and movement leaders they follow, not least the desire for politicians in particular to always control and filter the message. Still, if Lady Gaga can connect with her Little Monsters, and an offensive lineman for the Packers can commiserate with fans over unfair refereeing, why can't political leaders at least pay some heed to the conversations they are having with the most important people in their world – the public that elects and employs them?

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