METHODS IN THE MADNESS: SOCIAL MEDIA AND LESSONS FROM POLITICAL LEADERSHIP ELECTION CAMPAIGNS

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Taking a hard look at the US Presidential election to share the lessons we can learn from disruption in digital media

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We still remember it – and rightly so. The 2016 US election campaign result took the world by surprise, not least for its successful use of digital media to spin opinion, control the narrative and disrupt the established order that had apparently ruled since 1950. After nearly 8 years of subtly attacking the legacy of a sitting president to try to establish one candidate, an un-expected contender leveraged a deeper vein of discontent in the country. The one of class difference, a story mainstream media always tries to convert to race, often successfully. Looking at Trump's audiences carefully, the attendees were a surprise, racially mixed but class unified.

Donald Trump punched into the 2016 campaign cycle with energetic style. The 2016 US election campaign will be remembered for personal attacks and daring statements. With accusations flying, disinformation, misinformation and appeal to emotion and identity, politics became reality TV – 'live' wherever there is an Internet connection and abetted by viral marketing through social media. Donald Trump's campaign appealed to emotion and identity, featuring brazen attacks on individuals and institutions. Inversely, Hillary Clinton's campaign was about stories (real heroes), families (hers and yours) and legacy (inspiring future women leaders), delivered through statements that appeal to identity, role and tribe.

In past elections, US voters have sought a hero. Barack Obama's campaign played out a recognisable 'hero narrative', the lone figure succeeding against all odds. In 2016, we saw high colour images of the election candidates, standing alone, warrior-like in their pose, fist raised against a dark background: 2016 was all about the maverick. No institution was safe, even the old and mighty ones – the UN, Wall Street, Science, and NATO among them - all came under attack. 2016 was all about the promise of something different – a new way of doing things that made sense at the scale of a home, a family, and the individual citizen.

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A global trend?

Was the US election campaign simply part of a wider trend? Emotion was a similarly core feature of the Brexit and the French elections. In political campaigns the focus is generally not on what is said, but how it is said, who is saying it and critically, when and where it is said. It is for this reason that comparisons across different countries are difficult: no two places are the same, no two histories identical. But there are indeed a number of behavioural traits that are similar: the appeal to 'tribe' and identity, visual cues, and the timing and location of key speeches.

In France, for example, Macron's 'over-the-top' speech at the 10th December campaign launch was among the high drama moments of the election campaign that ultimately won him the presidency on 7th May 2017. Damning attacks on rival Fillon reached a crux in January 2017, while 'stunt' campaigning featured in the campaign of far-left Melenchon (who showed up in several places at the same time, by using a hologram). The cases for and against the UK remaining a member of the EU (however ambiguous that relationship may be in practice) played strongly on an appeal to individuals' sense of nationality and identity, with words like 'sovereignty', 'ours' and 'protect' signalling that, legal complexities aside, this was a vote about territory.

The digital aide

Social media is a gift to advertisers who want near-real-time insights about the success of their concept, product or image management. Data analytics allow analysts to sift reactions that matter from those that fall outside of, say, the target demographics or market, while natural language processing and generation can be used to auto-generate responses to trending sentiments. Similar techniques are recognisable in the 'advertising' campaigns of politicians and their sophisticated digital media teams.

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Quality of provenance and fact-based reporting is out, 140 character real-time politics is in. The key to successful messaging is, get it out fast and first. Veracity is less important when the prime objective is to stake out digital territory. Key to this strategy is controlling the narrative. Governments around the world have used 'troll factories' (legions who are paid to create fake accounts and comment on social media) since at least 2010. Russia has several thousand 'internet troops', China at least 300,000. The 'AK Trolls' of Turkey were formed in 2013 and number about 6,000, paid to neutralise critics of Erdogan's ruling party. The UK has at least 21 highly specialised soldiers: the British Army's 77th Brigade was specifically formed to 'control the narrative', particularly on persuading the UK's more impressionable and ideologically vulnerable citizens not to go to Syria.

Lessons for the corporate world

If the masters of the art of successful marketing are currently among the world's political elite, what trends and lessons can be transferred to the corporate world? New jobs have taken form in the past five to ten years, most notably those of community manager and big data analyst. And if business leaders are to use digital tools to relay traditional leadership attributes – providing vision, inspiring, fostering trust, setting example, etc. – it is reasonable to wonder if companies and organisations will see the rise of additional new job functions linked to that. However, we are seeing a transition, not a replacement. In large companies worldwide, HR is getting smarter at communicating across new channels, marketing managers are connecting with younger generation employees, and data scientists are analysing and supporting information needs across more units and functions.

Successful advertisers know that consistent and repetitive messaging works well with busy audiences and the best messages are the ones that people already want to hear. The concept of 'territory' is constantly evolving as personal brand is built around networks, social media status and 'tribe' (e.g. how many followers an individual can recruit, how many 'likes') . Text analysis of tweets and posts from the US election campaigns show that staying on-message builds brand. Once a message is built, smart advertisers control the narrative by constant surveillance and editing of their social media posture.

In the digital age, personality still matters. Political leaders use personal style to convince others of their mandate to act. Digital simply cannot replace a good speech – and even if we don't agree personally with the content of the speech, we remember it. Appeal to – and use of – emotion was an important feature in both the US elections and the Brexit vote - as it has always been throughout recorded human history.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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