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The Big Picture

Digital Handshakes in Networked Publics: Why Politicians Must Interact, Not Broadcast

Essay by danah boyd

Much to my dismay, American politicians primarily treat the digital world as yet another broadcast medium. They seem to think that they will be worshipped online if only they port their TV-styled material to the Internet. With this framework in mind, they pay consultants to build structured, formalized content for citizens to passively consume. When these endeavors fail to capture massive attention, politicians blame the medium.

Even in 2004, when politicians everywhere were discussing the potential of the Internet thanks to Howard Dean, most political campaigns only recognized digital citizens to the extent that they typed in their credit card numbers to support campaign finance. They never seemed to understand that there were people behind those wallets. Of course, I cannot fully blame the campaigns – they were trying to do what the e-commerce entrepreneurs tried a few years earlier. Yet, as venture capitalists learned the hard way with the burst of the tech bubble, there's a lot more to the Internet than online shopping.

By and large, two practices dominate everyday people's use of the Internet: information access and communication. Both are about interaction and engagement - with content and with other people. The result of everyday participation is the collective formation of networks – networks of people, networks of information, and networks of people juxtaposed with information. As such, the Internet is not simply a broadcast medium, but a "networked public." Just as with the offline equivalent – parks, malls, town squares, etc. – people come together for a variety of different purposes including socialization, status negotiation, consumption, and civic engagement.

The manifestation of networked publics is most visible with the current wave of online communities – social network sites like MySpace and Facebook, media-sharing sites like YouTube and Flickr, and blogs. These sites are not simply spaces for information dissemination; they are networked publics where people gather en masse to do the things that they would normally do in public places. In doing so, they help construct a new public sphere.

To their credit, political candidates understand that the services that help construct networked publics are important. They are rushing to social network sites to mark their turf and using YouTube to spread their message, but, all too often, their awkwardness shows. They know that the sites are important, but they don't seem to know why or what to do with them. While it is certainly possible to grandstand in networked publics, the social norms demand authenticity, a quality that is typically hammered out of most candidates at a young age.

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Consider the "friending" phenomenon, in which social network sites allow participants to list others as "Friends." The concept of Friends can be confusing because most people don't use this feature to list their closest and dearest; they list all of the people that they envision as part of their imagined audience. If they imagine that their profile will be viewed by just a few, they're likely to only list close friends while those seeking mass attention are far more likely to nurture thousands of connections. Not surprisingly, politicians are seeking fairly broad audiences so they (or at least their interns) run around trying to collect as many Friends as possible. The problem is that their enthusiasm more closely resembles a dorky 14-year old boy trying to appear popular than a celebrity supporting and nurturing fans. Their profiles have no life to them – no one wants to have a Deatheater as a Friend.

It is critical to understand the reasons for why people collect strangers and celebrities (of which, politicians are typically one or the other) on social network sites. The primary reason has to do with signaling identity information. A connection to Barack Obama or John McCain or even Stephen Colbert signals political affiliation, political engagement (or lack thereof), and philosophical bent. The second reason is to create an open channel for communicating with the public figure through comments. In other words, citizens use politicians for their own purposes, not to validate a snazzy new media campaign.

Having millions of Friends means nothing if politicians don't create a platform where they will listen to and validate people's woes. The primary place for said interactions is through comments. On MySpace and Facebook, Friends can leave comments or Wall messages – pithy remarks that are publicly displayed on an individual's profile. Getting comments makes a person look cool, but comments are also embedded in a social contract of reciprocity. Comments are not left on politicians' profiles simply to be consumed by the aide who controls the profile; they are crafted to provoke a response by the politician or by anyone visiting the politician's page.

Furthermore, comments are a form of social currency. Receiving comments from cool people makes the recipient look cool. Imagine what would happen if politicians sincerely reached out to some of their Friends and began commenting? Whenever bands do this, teens go wild and tell all of their friends. For some of the most politically engaged young people, this would be a huge energizer. All of a sudden, the candidate would go from being one of 9,000 Friends that a person has to someone who leaves a message and is visible by all of that person's Friends, many of whom are probably not connected to the candidate. The key is that these need to be genuine messages rather than mass-produced spam. Sadly, we see no such effort by politicians on social network sites. They think their profile is a way to advertise themselves, rather than a jumping off point to engage in a networked public.

Politicians stand little chance of activating Friend connections if they fail to nurture those relationships or understand the social norms that exist in networked publics. A Friend online does not automatically mean a vote offline. Simply having a digital presence doesn't convert people. Having a MySpace profile that looks like an ad campaign doesn't convince anyone to vote for you.

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Whenever I encourage campaigns to reach out and connect to the citizens of the networked publics, I'm told that politicians don't have time for this or that it's easier to broadcast. There's no doubt that broadcast is easier, but it's not nearly as effective as meaningful encounters. Politicians know that even in an era of TV they have to travel state-to-state to talk to people on their own terms in their own world. They also spend countless hours on the phone nurturing potential donors. For many young adults today, public life is primarily experienced online. By not taking the time to engage in networked publics, politicians are failing to engage those who spend much of their day there. It's time to start acknowledging networked publics and begin digitally shaking hands.

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