BiLivery : Influencer Marketing talk

Jessica Zbinden-Webster

When I said yes to this event, it was before the pandemic, and before social media began to permeate our lives even more than it already did. We became used to seeing colleagues faces on blurry videos, sometimes for the better, and were tempted not to tell our bosses when they were on mute.

With our lives socially distanced, digital communications and influencing have become so crucial to so many organisations.

Businesses have adapted, and one whose reputation has the highest stakes, is the House of Commons. Because, though it may not always seem like it, every MP's office is run like a small business, and parliament is the umbrella under which they work – a kind of extravagant hot desking space.

My job as a digital strategist in Westminster is to work with politicians and social media. I want to talk about the role of digital influence in British politics, specifically, over the last fifteen months, from the 2019 Election, through Covid and looking to the future. hopefully we'll all be on a beach somewhere exotic. We can but dream.

I should state now, for the sake of transparency, that while I work with figures of various political sympathies, my work is predominantly with and for the Conservative party. However, this topic transcends party politics, so I hope you'll bear with me if I tend to go a little tory-centric. It's an occupational hazard.

So, the 2015 election was the first real 'digital general election'. We saw the first sparks of a digital focus that was hinted at but never fully realised. There was the Milifandom on Twitter and there were efforts from all parties to convey the principal points of their manifestos, but, broadly speaking, the political digital environment was pretty uninspiring.

In the 2017 snap election, the conservatives were thrashed online, but they still did better than expected engagement-wise, which Labour hadn't counted on. Labour, on the other hand, excelled on social media. Jeremy Corbyn, or his team, had worked out how to appeal to younger voters with a video-focused social media campaign and by roping in influencers to spread their messages online. Everyone from rappers to actors endorsed Corbyn, whereas Theresa May was still figuring out how to use Instagram.

There was a clear digital strategy and, but ultimately, as we know, it failed to make the desired impact for the government or any other party.

The 2019 snap election was the game changer. Labour had established a good track record of online engagement, and they were confident they could build on that success. Their tactic was to market their party leader as something of the digital influencer he had already become. Though nobody was really clear where he stood on the catalyst that was Brexit – least of all Corbyn himself – one thing

could not be mistaken: Labour was Corbyn and Corbyn was Labour. He had a personal brand by this point which was inextricable, both politically, and visually, from Labour's online campaign.

Meanwhile, the Conservatives armed themselves for the digital election that was to come. They hired two 20 something experts from the school of Lynton Crosby who churned out graphics, animations, gifs, memes and viral videos like there was no tomorrow.

They posted on Facebook in excess of 20 times per day, whereas in 2017, it was around 3 times a day. Meanwhile, Labour upped their 2017 average of 14 to 17.

The Conservatives also employed a new digital strategy, the likes of which hadn't been seen before. To connect with the electorate and market themselves online simply by having fun. There was the viral video of Boris knocking down the brick wall with his bulldozer. There was the seasonal spoof of the scene from Love Actually where the slightly problematic bloke tries to woo Keira Knightley with the signs he's written on. The Conservatives parodied it, taking that scene and wrote campaign pledges on the cards, and ended with the Hollywood-esque tagline, 'Vote Conservatives Actually.' It was December, everyone had had it to the back teeth with Brexit, and something as light hearted as that was begging to be shared.

But before that, there was one post which set the tone for this new campaign direction n, and it came in the form of a Twitter graphic.

It was an amateurishly black and white image, with 'MPs must come together and Get Brexit Done.' written in Comic Sans. Nothing else. No explanation. It looked like something I knocked up on Word Art as a kid, and its quality was so poor, it absolutely looked as if it had been posted by mistake. Thousands of people jumped on the tweet, including opposition figures who revelled in mocking it. it was only later that the penny dropped. The conservatives were poking fun at their previous social media failings, and the opposition had inadvertently spread their message to millions of followers.

This moment marked a new direction for politics and social media. It was smart. It was self aware.

This wasn't the type of punchline viral content we were used to. It wasn't political posting. This was political influencing behind viral digital content.

In 2020, the new caucus of MPs only had a couple of months to get going before they had to abandon their offices and work from home due to the Covid-19 pandemic. You might remember me referring to MPs as mini businesses, and like any business, MPs run on a budget. An independent body regulates what MPs get to spend on staffing etc, but it is up to the MPs how they spend it. At the start of this year, as the pandemic took hold, there was an enormous hiring drive for communications and social media experts within the House of Commons. MPs – established and new – knew the importance of a strong digital presence in connecting with the electorate.

 But what was the tone these MPs adopted on social media, in between reposting the government message to stay at home?

 In short, unprecedently informal, like those successful posts during the campaign. It was suddenly ok – even encouraged – to be tongue in cheek and informal on social media. Using the formal language we traditionally associate with politicians for anything other than a matter of national concern, seemed out of touch. Even a bit awkward. As the pandemic became less of a shocking event and more like normal life. Politicians used Twitter if was less of a professional platform and

more like their personal social media that just so happened to be predicated on their job. It was ok to share a cat video if they really wanted, I mean, whatever gets you through lockdown.

This new relationship between elected officials, social media and constituents has been the lifeblood of political communications during the Covid-19 pandemic. Without the shift in formality that took place in 2019, political social would be a pretty depressing place today. In periods of social isolation, people are looking to their timelines for genuine human connection. They don't mind seeing the odd government retweet, but the data from my own work tells me people are much more interested in what their MP is doing on the weekend. They want to see scrabble, sourdough, a muddy spaniel after a country walk. These posts are the way in which politicians can build connection, and therefore influence, online.

It doesn't matter that this kind of content would have come across as unprofessional, or even self indulgent, a few years ago. The digital world evolves at an accelerated pace. And as we've seen in prior elections, those parties who don't keep up are left behind.

And this leads me to my final point.

How will the growing importance of digital influence in politics affect the politicians of the future? Will the archetypal politician, a technophobic old man in a blazer, be replaced with photogenic, tech-savvy counterparts? The latter are clearly an asset in the game of winning digital elections. are they the answer to engaging the allegedly politically apathetic youth, as Gen Z, who have never known life without the internet, start lining up at the ballot box?

At the process of candidate selection, how much will the ability to digitally influence be favoured over simply being politically engaged, or having good party connections?

But with parliamentary privilege potentially contradicting industry guidelines like those that have been outlined in this talk, what does this mean for regulation of these hypothetical future political influencers?

As social media mushrooms, from a communications tool to a way of life, so will digital influencing in politics. The big question at this juncture is, how?

It's a question I invite you all to mull over etc.