A new set of tools. But who's engaging?

Using social media for social change

By SUSAN MERNIT | Net-enabled social tools have enabled new models for grassroots activism and community building, and they have changed how we function in society — how we communicate globally and locally, how we form ties and how we organize and connect.

What's tricky about deploying social media today is not access to the technology, but the knowledge of how to deploy it across multiple platforms.

This paper is meant to take some of the fear and confusion out of the question of whether to use these tools or not. An accompanying resource guide and detailed case studies (available for download at www.ifocos.org) provide a tool kit for using social media to promote, brand and organize around an idea, movement, program or campaign.

What do we mean by social media?

When we talk about social media we're describing the web-based tools and services that allow users—ordinary people—to create, share, rate and search for content and information without having to log into a portal site or destination.

In other words, although in 1998 you might have gone to Yahoo or America Online to post pictures, send emails, chat in real time, today you go to various web services sites to perform various functions—which, nowadays, usually involve commenting, rating, communicating or creating and sharing content.

These tools that post pictures and share news are now considered "social" because in addition to the core functions they perform they are created in ways that also integrate users sharing and communi-

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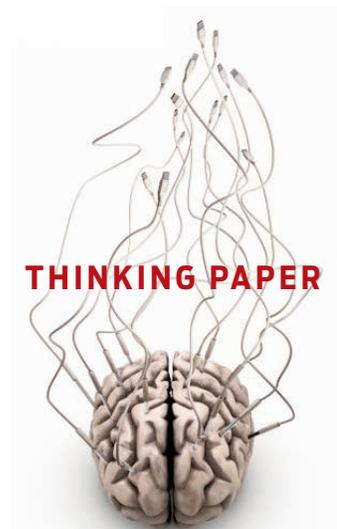
SOCIAL MEDIA

DISTRIBUTION MODELS

BUSINESS MODELS

COMMUNITY

COMMUNITY-CASTING

ENGAGEMENT

LIFESTREAMING

MOBILIZATION

FAIR USE

NETWORKS

OUTREACH

MICRO-GIVING

NON-PROFITS

NEWS ORGANIZATIONS

LOOP OF INFORMATION

cating with one another. Not that this is the opposite of the portal model, where a one-way flow of expert to user was the norm and community was not part of the experience.

In the U.S., the 2008 election of Barack Obama as president reflected unprecedented use of social media in a political campaign. The Obama campaign served as a stunning demonstration of a skilled team's use of widely available tools. According to a case study by James Burnes and blog posts by Jeremiah Owyang and others, the Obama campaign participated actively in more than 15 social networks and had 5 million active supporters through these vehicles.
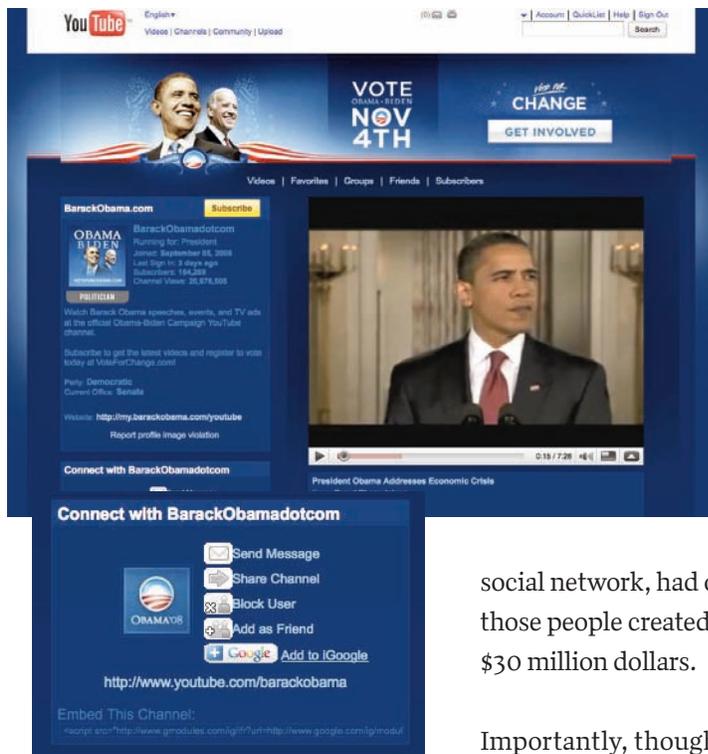
Barack Obama's popular YouTube channel has 15 videos that have been viewed more than a million times. Users are encouraged to interact with Obama through various social media channels.

On Twitter, "BarackObama" had 112,000 followers.

On Facebook Obama had 3.3 million friends, 500 groups, 33 applications

On YouTube, more than 14 million people watched the "Yes I Can" video. The campaign ultimately uploaded 1,800 "official" videos onto YouTube, 15 of the videos were viewed more than 1 million times.

MyBarackobama.com, a "self-managed" social network, had over 2 million people create profiles on the site; those people created 35,000 volunteer groups and raised more than $30 million dollars.

Importantly, though, effective use of social media to attract people to programs, organizations, brands and products doesn't require the large-scale resources that Obama's team so impressively deployed. The campaign's sophisticated and proprietary voting database, CRM-focused campaign emails and the Neighbor to Neighbor calling software and scripts developed by Obama's online campaign consultants at Blue State Digital helped raise an unprecedented $639 million in campaign funds.

But the services that were the workhorses of the campaign—Facebook, LinkedIn, Flickr, YouTube, and Twitter—are free to use and widely available.

Lifestreaming

The increasing adaptation of these tools has led to additional services that aggregate them together to provide an experience called lifestreaming. Lifestreaming is the ongoing broadcasting of information and events through a set of digital media — or what you might experience as the ripple effect of being able to watch the evolution of a news story, event, or person's life through the aggregated media of their blog, their videos they post to the web, their Twitters, photos, and so on.

Interestingly, while lifestreaming started as a way for one person to make their life as seamless and transparent online as possible (think about bloggers who post personal details every day, and photographers who create self-portraits daily on their blogs and Flickr streams), it quickly morphed into what might be called event or promotion or community-casting — scenarios where anywhere from dozens to millions of people all used inter-related social media tools around a specific theme, event or issue, creating huge virality and awareness.

We saw this type of community-casting early in 2004 when thousands of people across the world reacted to the tragedy of the tsunami in the Indian Ocean and the planet reacted, then saw it again with the London subway bombings in 2005, when the defining photo — sent around the world — was taken not by a professional photojournalist, but by an eyewitness with a cellphone. When the terrorist attacks happened in Mumbai in November 2008, it was the citizen media — blogs, photos, videos — that showed the world what had happened, and the social media tools — Twitter, YouTube that shared the pain. When events happen, they are shared and communicated across multiple platforms, but people reference and link them together.

Over the past year, there has been an increasing use of social media not only to react to or cover an event, but as a means to create or promote an event. Even more interestingly, social media communications seem to have the effect of creating a virtuous circle where

Arun Shanbhag's personal blog from the Mumbai attacks: http://arunshanbhag.com

Social media consultant Laura "Pistachio" Britton raised $25,000 for charitywater.org by enlisting her Twitter "followers."

social media organizes data and then feeds information back out to the community, intensifying the experience both online and offline, building awareness, engagement and impact.

Money and mobilization

When intelligently used, social media is reducing the need for both paid and volunteer staff and reducing overhead and operating costs for organizing. By tapping into the power of a network (and its good will), people can be mobilized, money can be raised, and programs promoted, often with surprising ease and speed.

Would you believe one woman could stand on a stage at a conference and spontaneously raise $2,500 in small donations for Cambodian orphans from a techie audience within one hour using Twitter? Non-profit advisor and consultant Beth Kanter did it at Gnomedex, a tech conference in Seattle. While the sum is small, the speed and the donor pool was new.

Another social media consultant, Laura"Pistachio" Fitton, used Twitter to raise $25,000 in a week, leveraging her contacts and her contact's networks. Asking each of her Twitter "followers" - all 44,000 of them - to donate $2.00 each, Pistacho get enough response, and enough public re-tweeting, or re-publishing, of her request — to raise $25,000 for charitywater.org. Based partially on the success of that, she participated in a worldwide effort — the Twestival — to raise $500,000 for the same cause.

But it's not only about raising money; social media has the power to mobilize people and drive conversation more effectively than many traditional brand marketing campaigns — and at a fraction of the hard costs.

For the Knight News Challenge, a $5 million grant-making program I managed this year as a consultant to The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, our goals were to increase awareness, draw in more tech and social media applicants worldwide, and build community. To that end, we crafted an on-going Twitter campaign, a blogging outreach program and a series of local, real world meet-ups publicized through the web. Not only did the number of unique visitors to the web site double from the previous year, and the page views triple, but also the awareness of the program sky-rocketed, resulting in a strong, innovative application pool.

And these are not isolated incidents.

Social media tools are providing the means for fundraisers to operate more efficiently, with less overhead and greater margins, and for organizers and brand managers of commercial and non-profit endeavors to build awareness, increase traffic and expand engagement with their brands.

How to use them?

Having access to these tools does not mean everyone knows how to use them.

The gap in the market has moved from having access to having knowledge. While Twitter, Flickr, Upcoming, Seesmic and so on are all free to the user, having the knowledge and skill to meld them together into an organizing strategy and marketing plan requires a fairly specific level of experience that most non-profit program managers, fund-raisers and community organizers and activists do not have.

Further, some of the micro-giving occuring with new, previously unaffiliated donors is based on principles of community partici- pation, giving back and good will that may not align with specific non-profit traditions.

Moreover, much of the innovation in this area is coming from purpose-driven marketing, PR and social media experts, not from the non-profits, who can be notoriously slow to adopt new meth- ods.

On the other hands, the transparency of the new efforts means everyone who is interested has a chance to analyze, learn, prac- tice and integrate these new skills.

The accompanying case studies detail the hows, whys, and how-tos of planning and executing these types of campaigns so that organizations of any size are better prepared to use social media to create self-organizing groups and viral momentum.

The case studies detail the goals, planning and execution and outcomes of each campaign. The accompanying glossary cate- gories the social media tools and includes a list of additional resources.

The full case studies and social media resource list are available for download at **www.ifocos.org**

Seesmic: A video service about conversation

REFERENCES

http://www.mybarackobama.com/

http://twitter.com/barackobama

http://twitter.com/pistachio

http://flickr.com

http://www.seesmic.com

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http://arunshanbhag.com/mumbai-blasts/

http://charitywater.org

http://knighnewschallenge.org

Case studies

Knight News Challenge, 2008-09

The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation wanted to use social media to reach a wider range of prospective applicants, both in the US and abroad, for the third year of the Knight News Challenge, a program that provides grants to innovative news and information projects. Their goal was to improve both the quality and the diversity of projects. Using social media and transformative tools, the team met and exceeded most of their goals, increasing both the page views by 200% percent and unique visitors to the site by 100% percent while receiving a stronger pool of applications.

Women Who Tech TeleSummit, April 2008

An online webinar/telesummit was used to reach over 600 participants and present top talent, with almost no cash expense. After four months of planning, Women Who Tech brought together technology pioneers and evangelists ranging from Arianna Huffington to Lynne D. Johnson of Fast Company and Joan Blades of MoveOn.org. Attendance sold out within 36 hours due to online outreach and marketing via Web 2.0 tools.

Twestival, January/February 2009

Twestival was a world-wide, self-organizing fund drive that used a combination of Twitter, a series of aggregated local web sites, and meet-ups and events in 184 cities to raise money for Charity:Water, a non-profit organization that provides clean drinking water to communities in developing countries, with a focus on serving children and schools. Organizers built up to a series of simultaneous events — live in the real world and streamed on the web — on February 12, 2009.

Susan Mernit is a former Netscape & AOL vice president who worked at Yahoo! as a Senior Director until 2008. She is a long-time blogger, consultant, online news innovator and social media maven who is passionate about using technology to connect people and to solve problems. Most recently, she ran the Knight News Challenge for The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation; she is also an organizer of She's Geeky and The Public Media Collaborative, a member of the 2009 ONA conference committee and an Equality Camp organizer. A long-time associate of iFOCOS & We Media, she holds the title of Entrepreneur-in-Residence at iFOCOS. Susan advises companies, start-ups, non-profits and foundations on product development and social media strategies. She is based in Oakland, Calif.