
In Social Media Content is King

Hon. Monte Solberg

Marshall McLuhan famously observed in the 1960s that the “Medium is the Message” with different media having their own way of impacting the viewer, listener or reader. This article argues that when it comes to social media and its impact on the political process and public policy we need to pay more attention to content rather than conclude that the medium itself is transformational.

There are a lot, of ways to come at the subject of social media, but let us narrow it down by asking some questions.

- What is social media? For our purposes we should focus on blogs, Twitter, You Tube and Facebook, while also noting that technologies like websites, texting and emails often get lumped in to these kinds of discussions.
- How much do social media users influence party and government issues and agenda’s? I am going to argue that it is not nearly as much as some people might think, or at least no more than the traditional methods.
- How much do politicians, political parties and their partisans influence the public via social media? I will again argue that the answer is, not very much. It is just another way of communicating.
- Can we tell from analyzing social media whether leaders and their parties have positions and messages that resonate with the public? I would argue that the answer is-somewhat. But it will never be the definitive analysis that political parties or Members of Parliament rely on.
- What are the best ways to use social media? I think the best way to use it is to think of it as an electronic newspaper doing all the things a newspaper does.

But first a little context. When I was the Member of Parliament for Medicine Hat I had a famous political constituent in the person of Senator Bud Olson, a former MP and Liberal Cabinet Minister. One day I was talking with Bud’s wife Lucille about what it was

like to be the family of an MP in the 1950s. She said that Bud would get on the train to Ottawa in September and they would not see him again until December. She said one time the neighbours stopped by after Bud senior had been in Ottawa for many weeks and asked their very young son Bud Jr. how his dad was. Bud Jr. said, with complete earnestness, “My dad is dead”.

Of course Bud was not really dead, it just seemed that way. He just could not easily communicate with his family located 2000 miles away, let alone his constituents. Mailing letters was the primary mode of communication followed by the telephone, though long distance calls were an enormously expensive luxury. Other than that MPs hoped they would get their name in the newspaper for sponsoring a popular private member’s bill or commenting on an important issue.

When I first started in Ottawa in 1993 email was in its infancy. People had computers but almost no one had an email account. The mail was still the primary mode of hearing from constituents and Householders and 10 percenters were the most important way to deliver messages. In those days getting 15 or 20 unique letters on a particular issue was an indication that the issue had struck a chord. After all it takes time, effort and more than a little faith to compose a letter, put it in an envelope, mail it and then expect it will do some good. However even twenty years ago MPs discounted the form letters that would start to arrive in bigger numbers if the issue was hot enough and an advocacy organization was behind it. In politics a much smaller number of unique and heartfelt messages of concern about an issue trumps much larger numbers of messages not uniquely composed by a regular citizen, especially if they come from outside your riding.

Today, things could not be more different. MPs in all parties have huge email databases. They have websites,

Hon. Monte Solberg represented Medicine Hat in the House of Commons. He is a former Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, and Minister of Human Resources and Social Development. He currently writes a popular weekly column for the Sun Newspapers, frequently appears as a contributor on Sun News Network. He continues to speak on public policy issues across Canada and internationally. This is a revised version of his presentation at the Canadian Study of Parliament Group Seminar on May 15, 2013.

Facebook pages, blogs, twitter accounts and Linked In profiles. Hundreds of emails, tweets, texts and Facebook messages pour in every day.

So, there has been a sea change in how we communicate, but in some of the most important senses the way we communicate has barely changed at all. MPs and their staff know, as social media skeptic Malcolm Gladwell has pointed out, that the barriers to entry to inputting a point of view to an elected official are so low that elected officials simply cannot afford to take them all seriously.

After all not everyone who sends messages will vote. On some issues the people who are most active are the ones least likely to vote. Pollster Frank Graves calls this “slacktivism”. In others words too often social media users either parrot a point of view on Twitter or sign a Facebook petition believing they are participating in democracy.

I would argue that there is more “slacktivism” than activism because in many cases people who are active in social media do not go out and campaign for their party or candidate of choice. Very often they do not even vote.

Harrison Samphir writes on *Rabble.ca*: “On May 2, 2011, the day of Canada’s last federal election, close to 2 million young people avoided the polls. Remarkably, only 37.4 per cent of Canadians aged 18-24 voted”.

Since then, much has been made of these historically low numbers, ones which suggest general detachment from, and passivity towards, the political process. After all, the last election featured the third-lowest voter turnout in Canadian history at 61.1 per cent.

What can explain such a pronounced disintegration of youth interest in politics and the aloofness with which young people are supposedly responding to their rights of citizenship?”

Samphir goes on to say:

The nature of modern Internet technologies have thus gravitated many young people toward the luminescent glow of laptop screens and mobile phones. Issues formerly demanding social action and political participation have been reduced to an expression of 140 characters. The consequence has been, in many cases, an implicitly engrained apathy among youth; the type of passivity engendered by online anonymity and the prevailing assurance that, at one’s fingertips,

lie the material and social comforts to bypass unwanted conversation or a *vexata quaestio*.

Liberal Leadership candidate Joyce Murray found the same thing when she allegedly won the support of tens of thousands of online activists at organizations like Avaaz and Lead Now. Undoubtedly, they did support Ms. Murray and her progressive views in every way except the way that really mattered. In the end they were more slacktivist than activist. Almost none of them bothered to vote for her.

While we still must wait for the analysis to come from the BC election it seems that environmental groups, unions and other progressives failed to show up to support the NDP despite unprecedented on-line commentary. It seems plausible that the Liberals using old technologies like TV and radio to run negative ads were far more effective than anything we saw on social media.

So, in exactly the same way as occurred when I was first elected twenty years ago elected officials today still must separate and deeply discount what I will call “cheap input” from authentic input. In the old days the cheap input arrived as form letters. Today they are form emails, Twitter re-tweets and Facebook petitions; all methods of communicating with very low barriers to entry.

To put it another way, content is king. Convince twenty people that they should each write a thoughtful email that is critical of a stand that an MP has taken and you will get his or her attention in a way you would never get if you had twenty people re-tweet a stinging personal criticism of that MP.

If I was the subject of that personal criticism, and I often am, I brush off the insulting partisans who are not serious about having a discussion. They are the anti-democrats and in my view should be blocked instead of engaged. Unfortunately, on Twitter especially, those kinds of partisan responses are common.

That said if you are willing to devote the time and fly through that flak you can have a measure of success. Treasury Board President Tony Clement frequently engages the public directly via Twitter. Undoubtedly this is true of a few MPs from all parties. Minister Clement will actually have a conversation with his followers though it is questionable how meaningful a conversation can be when it’s carried out in chunks of 140 characters. On the other hand some MPs haven’t been as successful social media. NDP MP Pat Martin has also had many conversations on Twitter, some of which were widely reported. Pat Martin has now, quite wisely, shut down his Twitter account.

Nevertheless, despite the attention social media gets political parties still get most of their information in

the same way they have for years; they canvass door to door, they poll and they do focus groups. You can certainly learn some things from analyzing social media responses through services like Sysomos but those services and software are not even close to being a replacement for talking to people directly and asking them what they think.

So, what about the other way around? When political parties communicate with the public how impactful is social media? The answer is, no more so than any other media. Again, content is king.

Tom Flanagan writing recently in the *Globe* noted that so far social media really has not had much impact on national Canadian political campaigns compared to the United States. He attributes this to cultural differences and different political systems.

By contrast, Canadian politicians use social media almost exclusively in a top-down way. They post pictures of themselves, their family members and their pets on their websites and Facebook pages, and put up videos featuring the same cast of characters on YouTube. They tweet to draw attention to their latest speech or to criticize opponents or just to tell their followers what they're doing today. It's an attempt to present their human side to voters, but it's also top-down communication that doesn't energize political participation.

Except for the odd MP like Tony Clement and Matthew Dubé I think Tom Flanagan is correct.

Suffice it to say that, to date, the ways that social media influences Canadian elections or provincial and national agendas are narrow and limited. I can think of only one issue where social media may have caused the current federal government to move on an issue, that being the CRTC proposal to allow large internet service providers to pass on extra charges for heavy

internet users. As you may recall the internet exploded at the thought of doing this and the government made it clear that it would not happen. Of course even if the Twitter-sphere had not exploded the government might have said that is a stupid idea and said no. Still, by and large, there are very few examples of social media driving government agendas, certainly not at the federal level.

All of that said social media can be influential in the same way that an old fashioned letter writing activist could be influential. Using social media gives citizen-activists a much larger potential audience than they had before. Anyone can have a blog, a Facebook page and a Twitter account so if you make good and appealing arguments it is possible to spark debates and, perhaps, influence governments. Sometimes it works the opposite way.

In almost every election bloggers dig up unflattering stories about candidates designed to hurt them at the polls. And of course in recent election several candidates have had to withdraw from campaigns because of what they have they have posted on Facebook and on their own Blogs.

So, where does this leave us? Social media is a tool, along with all kind of other tools and it is no better or worse as a communication medium than any of the others. It is just newer. True it empowers individuals to be more broadly heard but so far few people use that power effectively. I believe the issue is less about which medium we are using and it is more about what we are actually saying. Are we making good arguments? Are we honestly attempting to persuade.

Mediums come and go but it is the message itself that will always matter.