The dynamic social media tactics being used by North American politicians to infiltrate important voter bases that exist within Instagram communities.

Communities & Social Media

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Abstract

This paper explores the dynamic social media tactics being used by North American politicians to infiltrate important voter bases that exist within Instagram communities. Recent studies have shown that politicians' Instagram strategies in North America play a critical role in how favourable their impressions are to a younger audience. Specifically, how young voters find politicians trustworthy when they get on board with online advocacy. When politicians follow everyday social media practices, digital storytelling and the natural affordances of the platform, they are more likely to be favoured by the millennial and Gen Z audiences on Instagram. Politicians will strategically use a mix of private and public content to showcase both sides of themselves to their Instagram audience to create a parasocial interaction from within these political communities and use it to further their political careers. The paper sheds light on the creativity and effectiveness of these social media strategies being used by North American politicians so they can infiltrate the rich and vital voter base that exists within Instagram communities.

Conference Paper

Technology has played a role in communication from its inception (Delanty, 2018). This was only exacerbated further by image based social media, Instagram (Leaver et al., 2020). The effectiveness of communicating using images is one of the main reasons for the platform's success (Leaver et al., 2020). In 2018, Instagram had over one billion users worldwide, and it was the third most popular social media platform in the US (O'Connell, 2020).

However, there is a growing trend of political discussion and advocacy on the platform, mainly among its younger Gen Y (also known as millennials) & Gen Z users (Parks, 2020). These younger users have now created virtual communities around advocacy and everyday politics on Instagram (Highfield, 2016). As a result, heads of government are using social media to capture the attention of online political and advocacy communities that are prominent on Instagram (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019). Politicians saw an opportunity to engage with a community full of influential voters; they used a range of tactics to jump into the space and garner

attention from users. Politicians built trust through advocacy, communication strategies, and digital storytelling. They built reliability as a direct result of consistent everyday social media habits, and then finally, they personalised their content by sharing a glimpse into their private lives on their profiles. Instagram created a space where Millennials and Gen Z could engage in activism and everyday politics within an online community, but politicians in North America have jumped into and used the space to benefit their political images.

Social media platforms helped cyber communities, or online communities, to take form (Delanty, 2018). These new social groups often involve a common goal, objective, or opinion that allows the members of online communities to feel as though they belong or identify with a particular group online (Delanty, 2018). Virtual social media communities are more democratic than other forms of offline communities (Delanty, 2018). These spaces are more commonly associated with and used by both Gen Y (Millennials) & Gen Z generational groups, as they prefer social media platforms such as Instagram when it comes to interaction online (Parks, 2020). So, when Instagram began, it became the perfect space for politics to breed and communities based on politics to emerge (Raynauld & Lalancette, 2021). Often the potential that technologies such as social media have within politics is undermined and, as a result, overlooked (Papacharissi & Trevey, 2018). Yet over the last two decades, social media has become an integral tool in political communication and organisation across several areas of the world, including North America (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019).

Millennials and Gen Z use social media to discuss politics and participate in politically themed activities (Highfield, 2016). From live-streaming and photos sharing, the online communications found on Instagram offer activists and protest groups a form of organisation and increased feelings of solidarity between those participating in everyday politics online and those physically advocating (Highfield, 2016). A prominent example of this is the promotion of hashtags such as #LoveWins when the United States discussed legalising gay marriage and the hashtag #IdleNoMore in a campaign centred around the Canadian indigenous and First people to centralise communication and advocate online (Highfield, 2016). As a result of the creation of advocacy and political communities on Instagram, politicians began to see the benefits of using Instagram and these communities to advance

their campaigns, agendas and political image. By engaging with advocacy communities and participating in movements, using hashtags and the visual affordances of Instagram, politicians have built trust within these communities (Highfield, 2016). This tactic is especially dynamic, as Millennials & Gen Z are both more receptive to political storytelling and visual content on Instagram, than they to traditional political communications (Raynauld & Lalancette, 2021). So, politicians hoped onto Instagram and began using an already established community to create the trust and attention they wanted. When politicians show they share the same views and goals as these online communities, they build trust (Raynauld & Lalancette, 2021).

Such a tactic has been used by previous politicians. Justin Trudeau is the most common example, as he is considered the first federal Prime Minister of the Instagram Era in Canada and was one of the first political figures in North America to use Instagram to his advantage when on the election campaign trail (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019). In the US, politicians have also been using already established communities to encourage users to follow the link in their bio, to drive users off the platform and onto the candidate's site so they will sign up for their emailing lists, which has been done by both Clinton & Rubio (Bossetta, 2018). Virtual communities empower people, particularly people who are more likely to be excluded from power, especially in politics, such as women, the disabled, young people and ethnic minorities, which is why Instagram attracts their attention (Delanty, 2018). Despite often being forgotten in politics, these people play an increasingly important role on election day (Raynauld & Lalancette, 2021). This is why politicians, especially those that fall into those categories, use advocacy as a tactic on Instagram to their advantage (O'Connell, 2020).

Politicians use advocacy to further their cause, but they also use the affordances of the Instagram platform itself to become more prominent (Highfield, 2016). The introduction and development of visual-centric social media, such as Instagram, has helped bring visuals back to the forefront of politics (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019). Now visuals are being used throughout the permanent political communication process and personally with political leaders (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019). These visuals play a huge role in how the public view politicians, with voters specifically

looking for qualities such as honesty, intelligence and trustworthiness when looking at these visuals (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019).

Many government members have become empowered by this, and the virtual communities online are made up of their supporters (Delanty, 2018). In the current political context, Instagram redefines how the public evaluates politicians and their performance in their position (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019). This is why through Instagram accounts, politicians can post visual content to help their political image and their campaigns and deliver a message that resonates with voters (Parks, 2020). A meaningful way politicians use Instagram is by using it to reach younger, or up and coming voters and shape their discussions about critical issues before they have even reached the polling booths (O'Connell, 2020). They are framing themselves to the generations that most commonly use the app, which is from Millennials onwards, and capitalise on the access they have to them (Parks, 2020). Every day social media habits on these platforms, such as hashtags, stories, and regular posting, will make the politicians seem relevant to their audiences (Highfield, 2016). Politicians will also tag and mention other important figures to get their content in front of new eyes on the platform (Highfield, 2016). Since millennials are increasingly receptive to informal political communication and visual content, this is used in politics to further the politician's campaign messaging and views (Raynauld & Lalancette, 2021).

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau did this when he posted a set of theme-based visual political narratives rooted in his attributes to reach his audience informally, and he did so successfully (Bossetta, 2018). Another politician who has used the affordances of everyday social media practices on Instagram was Scott Walker. He built an impressive following during the Wisconsin recall election in 2020 by promoting his account and plugging it at events and rallies while posting stories during these events (Bossetta, 2018). Politicians can use the correct type of interaction and posting on Instagram to further their cause, which does not just include the visual aspects but also the written aspect (Peng, 2021). Captions with positively or negatively balanced words are more likely to garner a reaction and an interaction from an audience on Instagram (Peng, 2021). This is why the communication strategy of politicians on Instagram has to be just right for the associated parties to benefit from using Instagram in a political sense (Parks, 2020).

By using the affordances of Instagram and adhering content to what has proven to connect with the younger generations, politicians can use the platform to their advantage. By utilising what millennials and Gen Z have already created within the political and advocacy spaces on Instagram, politicians take hold of these communities by using strategic actions to garner trust, attention, and interaction with Instagram users.

Social media allows politicians to have direct access to ideal audiences, meaning that a media outlet does not angle their content, and the politician has complete control over how their audience perceives them (Parks, 2020). Therefore, self-identity is important for a politician. However, identities on online social networking sites are often a blend of public and private (Papacharissi, 2011). On platforms such as Instagram, politicians must perform to a degree to present a mix of public and private moments without actually delving too far into their actual private lives (Papacharissi, 2011). When politicians attempt to utilise Instagram and its communities to benefit themselves, they must look at their political image management and its constructions on the platform to reap the most benefits. Due to the current social media landscape, political elites have to adjust their images to emphasise their personal qualities on Instagram and even use their private lives as a communication tool (Davis & Taras, 2020). While many politicians might enjoy or prefer to keep their private and public lives separate, especially on such a vast platform, this will need to change if they aim to get inside the Millennial and Gen Z communities (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019).

To create an identity on Instagram that appeals to Gen Y & Z, elected officials will need to embrace showing aspects of their private lives to the world (Davis & Taras, 2020). It humanises the candidate and gives the potential for a different sort of political storytelling that connects with an audience more than an official statement (Davis & Taras, 2020). Users of Instagram connect with political accounts because they are highly accessible, which appeals to them (Bossetta, 2018). A common political strategy is personalising issues, so the public feels the connection between the issue and the elected official (Peng, 2021). It is the same concept as sharing visuals that show an inside look at the private lives of politicians (Peng, 2021). Research has shown that political and personal social media accounts gain

favourable impressions from their audience (Peng, 2021). Personal photos, family photos and selfies are the types of content that encourage followers to create a parasocial interaction with the candidate (O'Connell, 2020). Parasocial interaction is a one-sided interaction that happens when individuals feel they have developed a friendly relationship with a public figure, although they have never formally met (O'Connell, 2020). A parasocial interaction gives the impression to any individual that they feel necessary or noticed by the public figure (O'Connell, 2020). It is what many politicians are aiming for by personalising their content with snippets from their private lives (Peng, 2021).

An impressive example of this is again Justin Trudeau, Prime Minister of Canada, who uses his Instagram as more of a personal channel, featuring photos of him with his daughter and his wife and various other intimate family moments (Davis & Taras, 2020). He does this while promoting cultural diversity and sharing photos of meetings with global figures and at significant events, which shows the public side of him and his work, with his private images scattered in between (Davis & Taras, 2020). Politicians who utilise their private lives to further their popularity across Instagram and the millennial and Gen Z voters on the platforms are more likely to be seen as favourable public figures (Peng, 2021). Using this strategy is not new; however, applying it to visual based social media platforms, such as Instagram, allows for a more accessible entrance into the feeds of their ideal audience (Davis & Taras, 2020).

The introduction of Instagram shook up the political space. It allowed millennials and Gen Z to create a space and community around everyday politics and advocacy. However, these communities could benefit individual politicians and their campaigns if utilised correctly. So, when politicians began noticing the affordances that visual political communication on Instagram could have for them, they jumped on board and took over these communities and spaces that Millennials and Gen Z created. These elected officials then took hold of these communities by using advocacy related to their political views, which built trust between the users and these politicians. Then the political figures used the natural affordances of the Instagram platform to further their social media presences using hashtags, everyday social media habits and adhering to content norms that are known to be popular and

attractive to younger voters. Then politicians continued to move their way into these existing communities by ensuring that they personalised their content to give users a view into their private lives while still delivering the necessary public political content, to garner further trust, reliability, and favourable impressions throughout their millennials and Gen Z audiences. These tactics allowed politicians in North America to jump into the communities where Millennial and Gen Z engage in politics and advocacy to advance and improve their political image.

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