

Bad Actors 2 – another smash-hit in the making?

Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg described the political operators who manipulated social and digital media in 2016-17 as 'bad actors'. Now even more high-tech misbehaviour is on the way, says Alex Connock. It could ensnare a whole new audience

Get ready for the follow up to the controversial, 2016 digital, global blockbuster hit: Bad Actors. The next instalment in this populist franchise will draw in hundreds of millions more. And like every other product in the streaming economy from Netflix to Spotify, this time it will sign them up one by one.

Mark Zuckerberg claimed those who manipulated Facebook's social and digital media to such effect in the democratic cataclysms of 2016 and 2017 were 'bad actors'. An un-heralded cast, they got eye-popping results, including the Brexit and Trump votes. And however nefarious these groups were – from the dubiously legal if murkily financed, through to full-scale state-funded espionage – they weren't always acting on innovative tradecraft. Many of the tools they used were just off-the-shelf digital marketing.

It's troubling but unavoidable that much of what fundamentally disrupted political campaigns in 2016-17 actually came from the popular, day-to-day practice of glitzy Instagram industries like fast fashion, and that is only set to continue. The same technology that is disrupting the High Street is doing it to politics as well.

Ask a standard, millennial digital marketer working a product line in an e-commerce company, and they will tell you the much-critiqued behavioural profiling, along with the targeting, re-targeting and real-time approach to digital media buying, which lay at the heart of the effective digital media operations of (say) Brexit, was bog standard. I've had several conversations with blasé e-commerce professionals about Cambridge Analytica's techniques, which took pretty much the opposite editorial trajectory as Channel 4 News. They went along the lines of: 'Yeah, whatever'.

The consumer industries that are shaking up the consumer world, and bulldozing high streets worldwide with real-time digital marketing, have also ended up helping to revolutionise politics. Which means that if you want a preview of Bad Actors 2 – i.e. what's going to happen in the next political cycle, 2018-22, legitimate or not

– don't expect a regulator-driven return to the comfortable dialectic of identifiable, transparently-sourced and regulated party materials. Take a moment instead to look at how digital marketing is racing forwards again – then read across to a new world of (now) millions of pieces of content – untrackable, anarchically distributed and hyper-personalised.

Here are two previews of how next season's blockbuster politics will be affected by the changing dimensions of digital marketing – in ways as different from the party political broadcast, leaders' debate, The Sun front page, or for that matter intra-bubble Twitter spats between Westminster pundits, as Mission Impossible: Fallout is from The Maltese Falcon.

Messaging to go multi-channel?

The first preview is that across digital marketing, messaging is going much more multichannel, and more predictive. The global digital advertising market – expected to reach €268bn by 2021 – is becoming a multi-faceted stream of customer interactions, rather than any single-channel, any influential post or adwords purchase. As New York University digital marketing commentator Scott Galloway writes¹: “The ability to leverage multiple data points to provide a contextual view of consumers will drive the evolution of predictive analytics, giving retailers models that will help them determine consumers' likely future actions and needs. This will not be a perfect process by 2026, but it will certainly be instrumental in reducing the risk in R&D for new product development.”

For new product development, read political campaign. For multiple data points, read finding the hot buttons in each person's echo bubble, and then slamming your fist down on them all simultaneously.

Enhanced user data will now drive integration between marketing and transactions, whether those transactions are e-commerce purchases – or votes. UK fashion brand boohoo.com had 7.8m video views in July 2018 – a number for which the Conservatives would have bitten your arm off in their feckless, Edwardian-era June 2017 campaign a year before.

Like fast-fashion brands, parties will now need to open this omni-channel, real-time communication with their users. Start a conversation with a customer or voter on one channel, ‘drop a pixel on them’ (industry parlance for digitally watermarking a customer so that you can tell henceforth where they go on the internet and what they like) and you can pick that conversation up a month later on a completely different channel, as if neither of you had ever been away.

Anyone for AI?

The second preview sees the next wave of digital marketing, and therefore political marketing, made up of bulk individualised messaging to individuals, based on videos.

Eighty per cent of the world's internet traffic will be video by 2019. The ecology of personalised and individually served video content is growing fast. One UK digital advertising executive describes it like this:

"The skill is to make an infinite number of targeted videos out of a limited number of creative assets. If you can infinitely reduce the cost of creation you can win search. There are an infinite number of Peppa Pig edits on YouTube made in real time by an AI (artificial intelligence) that is hooked into inbound search that is trained to win searches for Peppa Pig. You could do that for any video and any product. One agency invented the library-based approach to dynamic ad serving. We would serve up an ad with the right product at the right time for the right person with dynamic pricing within set parameters. Where are you based? What are your characteristics? There is nothing new in dynamic ad serving. What is new is the ability for the machine to learn at scale and at pace what people will respond to, and adjust itself."

Video lengths and styles will be optimised to you and will vary depending on your sex, where you are and whether you've browsed the site before, and a hundred other factors. If you spent an hour on the site looking at a specific topic weeks ago, you don't need to see the general film today. You will more likely to be served up a topic-specific video advert now to convert you into a buyer. The very content of the video itself will be custom-made for you based on your interaction history – from the colour of the fonts, to the position it offers on the NHS.

As these methodologies of e-commerce become applied to political messaging, the level of content to fact-check will reach an exponential level compared to 2016 – when mimes and videos were already out of control. With artificial intelligence, there will be uncheckable millions of different political commercials running simultaneously, offering diametrically different policy messages even from the same party to voters in the same street.

In the consumer world, startup agencies working for global household brands are taking a set of basic visual assets, then using automated creativity to almost instantly create thousands of creative variables and test them on the audience.

Not only can the machine learning work out the most effective variant of any given advert (which is the kind of iterative testing effectively used in the 2016 Trump and Brexit campaigns). But it can also create potentially fundamentally contradictory versions of the same advert, each for a different individual. In the consumer world, there are plenty of legitimate agencies doing this stuff already – like Refuel² have deployed AI technology to update underperforming adverts. Persado³ offers AI-generated headlines, images and language. And Jivox⁴ offers dynamic video advert selection according to whether, for instance, men or women are viewing the content.

What does this mean for politics? It means implementing real time personalisation and adjustment like e-commerce does it. It means taking that Napoleon strategy -

‘On s’engage, et puis on voit’ – and applying it not across a battlefield as a whole, but to every single voter interaction individually. Keep changing your offer until they bite.

Dystopia is not the only possible future

Not all digital marketing has to end like an episode of Black Mirror. If the mainstream political class, gunned down like cavalry at the Somme in 2016-17 by the populist movements’ next-generation use of social media and digital, can catch up next time around and embrace it, there is plenty on the app menu for them to play with.

In fact, parties have no choice but to embrace digital marketing, because the market is fundamentally moving against all the traditional communication channels. Getting the editor of News At Ten inside is less and less important. UK TV advertising dropped 2.9 per cent in 2017, while pure-play internet was 13.3 per cent up, according to media agency Group M figures. It was worse among the TV-shy young: among 16-24 year olds, linear TV viewing will fall by 12 per cent in 2018 while 16-34 year olds will be 8 per cent down, Group M predicts. For the under 25s, press is all but dead as a channel.

Advertisers – including political advertisers, candidates and parties – can go straight to individual consumers with videos using customer-specific targeting of digital marketing. They can do this right down the conversion funnel of awareness, consideration, conversion and retention. And they can flex their messages as subtly as they choose, with AI to tweak every message so that each viewer gets their own, perfectly customised butterfly landing on their wrist, at the perfect time in the campaign.

The attention economy is now measured in the flick, Facebook’s new unit of time. Snapchat – the chosen platform of the under 20s – advises advertisers to put their branding in the first two seconds of a video because view time is so short. Any longer and it will be lost. Did you ever see a conventional party political broadcast that came anywhere close to achieving that?

But don’t confuse the medium with the message. Colleagues of mine at Oxford’s Said Business School have shown in research that positive, inspirational messaging can be more powerful than negative propositions in charity advertising. Could the same be true in political messaging? Maybe if liberal politics embraced the new digital marketing medium as aggressively as the outriders did in 2016 and 2017, but put the positive messages in, Bad Actors 2 could be the glorious flop at the box office that we’d all love to see.

Notes

¹ The Four: The hidden DNA of Amazon, Apple, Facebook and Google, published by Portfolio Penguin 2017 pp.

² <https://www.refuel4.com/>

³ <https://persado.com>

⁴ <https://www.jivox.com/showcase/>

Note on the contributor

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