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Mapping the New World: Lessons from the Obama Campaigns

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Where we are and how we are connected to others are fundamental to our understanding of ourselves and the world around us. From the earliest days of exploration, cartography was essential not only as a tool for navigation but also for understanding identity. It has helped us to rethink economics, to redefine our relationship to our present and past, and to imagine the concept of foreign relations on a global scale. As continued globalization and the maturity and penetration of the internet make our world feel ever smaller, we are increasingly disoriented at the hands of a rapidly advancing media and technology landscape. Everyone from technologists to sociologists has attempted to articulate how communications is shifting and what that shift means for individuals, organizations, media companies, and governments. We have found truth in bits and pieces including the thoughtful work of David Armano on convergence and Jeff Hammerbacher on networks, but we still need a comprehensive new topology to knit together our piecemeal understanding of the converging media and technology world around us. As individuals, how do we make sense of the cacophony around us? As organizations, how do we find and engage the communities that matter most? This is the first step: we need a new map. A new map is the foundation for a new understanding as individuals and grounding for organizations to communicate with new power, regain their lost confidence, and engage and empower people with new purpose.

In 2008 the Obama for America (OFA) campaign was lauded for reinventing political engagement. However, we did not create a new landscape. In 2007, with Facebook growing into the tens of millions of users finally open to the world beyond .edu addresses and Twitter just opening its doors, the beginning of this shifting media and technology world was creating the a new landscape on which we capitalized. Driven by the political reality of the Democratic primary, we built on the innovations of MoveOn and the 2004 Howard Dean campaign to embrace opportunities presented by this new landscape to permanently change people's expectations for what it means to participate in politics. A traditional Democratic primary electorate was going to vote for a traditional Democratic primary candidate and that was not the then-Senator from Illinois with the funny name. Led by the quiet leadership of David Plouffe and the digital genius of Joe Rospars, OFA had to fundamentally expand the electorate by bringing new people to participate in politics in new ways. We had to reach into new networks and new places to give new people new paths into our organization. We dispersed opportunities to engage across the internet the same way we dispersed field

organizers into thousands of communities around the country. Embracing social platforms like Facebook and Twitter was not about finding more channels to augment traditional media channels in order to broadcast more messages. Social media platforms are not channels: they are spaces for engagement and new behaviors that extend beyond consumption. In 2008 it was about empowering people to take action to join a community to drive the country in a new and essential direction. We tripped into a new understanding of the nature of communication and engagement. And while others have applied graph and network theory to the social media landscape, it is time to take that picture much further.

The Post-Fragmentation Graph

Social media and the rise of the internet have been richly analyzed through the lens of the graph, but our old metaphors for mapping the entire media landscape need revision. We have arrived in this new world through a long process of trial and error, and this new cartography will be revised undoubtedly by my contemporaries and definitively by those who come after me. We are on a continuum. We inherited a media world dominated by fragmentation. Over the last decades, our primary channels of paid, earned, and owned communications have each been disrupted by new technologies. Paid by cable, satellite, and mobile networks. Earned by the blogosphere and citizen journalism. Owned by desktop web publishing and social platforms. The ubiquity of social platforms and the behaviors they have made habitual play an essential role in moving us beyond a world where fragmentation is the defining characteristic of media and communications. All of these fragments are still present, but they have been knit together into a landscape defined more by interconnectedness, media portability, and integrated experiences than by the separation and alienation of the fragmented world of the past decade. And it is this interconnectedness that has fundamentally altered so much of what we knew about effective communications and that can help us reorganize our strategic thinking to fit the new world.

If we leave behind fragmentation as the defining characteristic of media, the entire interconnected landscape of communications comprises a complex graph—a network of networks where we are all nodes in a massive, often messy, sometimes beautiful graph.

Nodes of the graph are the people, companies of all kinds, organizations, institutions that create information and content. Edges of the graph are the ways we are connected to each other and deliver and consume information including Facebook relationships, following on Twitter, websites, TV channels, and radio. Some nodes are primarily consumers of information, passive parts of the graph that do not play active roles in creating or sharing content. Some nodes seem to do nothing but create content like media companies for your teenage daughter. Some nodes create very little but play important sharing functions moving content from one part of the graph to others. Some edges are private, some public. Some are controlled by specific nodes like CNN's broadcast network or the front page of the *New York Times*. Some are bidirectional while others are one way. With these core concepts in mind, we can begin reimagining strategic communications in fundamental ways that will help us make sense of the new world around us that so often feels so foreign through old lenses.

Viewing the world as graph, we no longer fit fixed roles in a hierarchy of media where publishers use media channels controlled by companies to reach consumers. This is not the democratization of media; I am not equal to CNN in this new world. But the power dynamics between individuals and institutions have been disrupted. I can create and distribute content globally without anyone's permission, and I can reach CNN's audience directly with out theirs. They still control the connection between them and their viewers via their broadcast network. But controlling that connection no longer means controlling access to that audience. Even the most reclusive are connected to dozens of other individuals and organizations, so any one edge is almost never the only way to reach someone. This also does not represent the death of traditional media forms. CNN is not inherently less valuable in a system with more connections. A growing body of research suggests that media consumption is not a zero-sum property. More and more we simply consume more media when presented with new options rather than opting out of old ones for new ones. But our new reality forces CNN to be both creator and participant, to create new incentives for using the pathways they control. It forces individuals to rethink what information they look to CNN for and why they turn to CNN for it and organizations to rethink why and when they might want to use CNN's connections to communicate. In the 2012 iteration of the Obama for America campaign, ads produced for television were seen more often online via YouTube and paid pre-roll advertising than on broadcast channels. The entire concept of reach is upended if we cannot dictate which paths content will follow, and our understanding

of authority and influence are just as upside down. Twitter forced rapid response into real-time response during debates where conventional wisdom coalesced on social media before the debate even ended. These changes are the shifts that have upended journalism, and the industry's inability to regain its equilibrium is why it has yet to discover a new business model to fit the new world.

Where Do We Go From Here?

The explosive growth of social platforms and the embedding of social behaviors (commenting, sharing, retweeting, and the new dynamic behaviors created everyday) into other forms of media has given social interactions a role in the everyday life of the vast majority of the media consuming world and has made all media portable. Shifting media behavior from passive consumption to active participation forces all publishers into the often-uncomfortable new posture of participant. Participatory media elevates dialogue in communications and creates whole new ways of engaging with organizations and participating in causes. Even people who do not themselves share or tweet content (still the majority of people) consume more information from indirect and unpredictable sources than ever before. In this world, we cannot reliably control where or how people will choose to consume content or choose to engage with us. We can attempt to control it by refusing to participate, playing ostrich, and praying the world will spin backwards into the world as we remember it. Barring the emergence of a conservative Superman bent on turning back time, we need to acknowledge and examine the new world for what it is and leap forward.

In this new world, the concept of the uniform aggregate audience falls apart in favor of increasingly personalized experiences. All nodes must embrace the uniqueness of each relationship with each other node. We are all connected by dozens of paths—some direct and meaningful, some unintentional and haphazard. Which paths are the best to activate the people we are trying to reach and engage? All communication is about some kind of behavior change: opinion shift or reinforcement, conversion to new actions or encouraging repeated ones. How we deliver opportunities to engage and which paths we cultivate with the people and organizations we engage with along multiple paths are massively more complex than they have ever been. Targeting an

audience used to be about finding the right message and the appropriate channel. Now, even the word “audience” suggests an inaccurate passivity. Engagement is about participating in the community and influencing whole sectors of the graph relevant to the people we want to engage. In many ways the most important shift in our thinking about communications, both as individuals and as organizations, is a willingness to embrace complexity at every level: more roles, more messages, more paths, more opportunities. To make sense of this new map, we need to rethink reach and amplification, authority and influence, persuasion and activation, and the implications of immortality and then launch ourselves into the new world with new confidence.

How Do We Get There?

A hierarchical system where people played stable, consistent roles presented us with much simpler strategic questions: which message, which channel, and which audience? We excelled at targeting communications to ever more fine-grained groups. In the new world, we need to replace which channel with which paths and which audience with which communities. We must focus on how to build relationships that include both content we create and deliver—directly or indirectly—and content created by others and how messages from multiple directions are reinforcing or conflicting. Rather than just message delivery, we focus on building connections to both the people we are trying to reach and the people they connect to and influence. Direct connections are not always the most effective, but the cultivation and deepening of direct relationships can give our organizations outsized influence on the graph around us as other organizations seek to influence overlapping communities. People that mostly consume information from social nodes make decisions differently than those who most get information from more direct sources. People with higher proportions of social connections demand a greater degree of participation and engagement with much higher expectations for an organization to not only speak to them but also listen. So we must be thoughtful and agile in how we produce content, where we present different opportunities to engage, and in which conversations we participate. Organizations that only create content but do not contemplate its indirect consumption as an opportunity to engage nodes further away in the graph will unnecessarily restrict their reach and influence. They may enjoy significance if their content is spectacularly engaging but will

often over-estimate their importance by unintentionally narrowing their view of the entire system. In a world where people often consume more than 24 hours of media in a day, connections are not a zero-sum system. Rather than seeing indirect connections as threats to direct connection, we must realize that the more paths of more types that we can embrace, the more opportunities we can create.

Taking full advantage of these expanding opportunities represents a massive content creation challenge, but more importantly that content inspires ongoing conversations. Creating compelling, emotionally resonant storytelling is a prerequisite to meaningful engagement. But the real opportunities lie in participating in and leading conversations that extend far beyond our direct reach. This participatory posture requires agility and humility that most organizations lack but that all need to explore and create relationships beyond the walls of our current experience.

Fully embracing the uniqueness of our relationships means abandoning the most durable (and offensive) marketing metaphor of the last fifty years: the funnel. While all kinds of optimization are possible in funnel-oriented thinking, it is by definition impersonal treating everyone in a pre-defined process as of undifferentiated equal value. Organizing meaningful opportunities to engage over time allows each person more agency to create his or her own experience and deepen his or her engagement over time leading to more opportunities to engage over the lifetime of the relationship. Even with the rise of increasingly personal experiences with increasing focus on organic content, this new world is not the death of advertising. Paid media edges still remain essential components of effective engagement, but they must be integrated as part of this ladder of engagement for them to be relevant beyond their own existence as creative, compelling but one-off experiences.

Rising personalization of experiences and shifting balance of direct and indirect paths also means that we more and more often do not consume information directly from original sources. Especially in the context of how we understand news and journalism, our old structures have dissolved. Who is an authority on what and how do we know? We are used to attaching authority to individual edges and individual nodes. If we look back far enough, this is the world where we all learned about events from Walter Cronkite, and we all more or less believed what we heard. For better or worse, we relied on the fixed relationships of the system to dictate authority. But when everyone is

connected to everyone else producing content and institutions are increasingly not the first to produce information about new events, what is authoritative fact? And if breaking news is no longer the primary role of journalists, what is? In technology conversations, we generally say building a product can generally be accomplished in a combination of two of good, fast, or cheap but never all three. If we expect to get all information instantaneously for free with perfect accuracy, we are kidding ourselves. Part of the amazing opportunity to create and participate as individuals in a global graph is that as individuals we must accept more responsibility and become better, more thoughtful consumers of information if the system is going to function.

In our old way of thinking, we loved to create marketing campaigns from whole cloth that ran for six weeks then ended with no memory. But in a world where unique lifetime relationships are not just the norm but also an important goal, we must encourage and embrace institutional memory. We have to think beyond the campaign and embrace a longer horizon. While content has always been archived, the instant and constant availability of messages over time also means that we have to rethink our relationship to our past. Our messages are immortal in ways that change how what happens today affects what is possible tomorrow. Others will argue that the cacophony and the short attention span of most people in the system mean that these implications should hold little sway over our strategic thinking. However, if history is at our fingertips, we must act as if we could be confronted by it at any moment, even if those moments are rare.

If the world is different, we must be different

As individuals, we have both more opportunity and more responsibility. More chances to be more connected to more people and more access to more information come at the price of passivity. We must embrace the power of our role in the system and become the discerning, active consumers and creators the system demands. As organizations, we need to reorganize how we function so that our internal structures reflect reality. The days of assigning departments to channels and not worrying about integration are gone. This new landscape was developed under the pressure of platforms and networks designed to drive human interaction and personal relationships. To participate in a

system that craves authenticity, where being effective means being personal, we have to embrace emotion and humanity in ways that have been bled out of most corporate communications. Embracing and articulating coherent values and a meaningful sense of purpose are essential. We must give people a role in our mission, to give them opportunities to drive our organizations forward rather than simply treat them as targets and consumers. At its core, this is what made Obama for America so powerful: an organization with a deep-seeded sense of purpose that embraced its capacity to create lifetime relationships with a massive community where everyone was empowered to drive the mission.

We are in a new world. The lessons of both the 2008 and 2012 Obama campaigns can lead us to put our values and sense of purpose at the center of how we participate in the world. We should never underestimate the power of inspiration. Do not run from the complexity of the moment: embrace the opportunity and engage with purpose. Burn the boats, and strike out for new ground.