

A 'Conversation,' and the Real Conversation

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February 9, 2007 12:20 PM EST

In 1999 four men with years of experience in marketing published "The Cluetrain Manifesto: The End of Business as Usual," which offered a series of simple propositions about how the Internet was changing their world, and ours.

"Markets are conversations," wrote Rick Levine, Christopher Locke, Doc Searls and David Weinberger. "The Internet is enabling conversations among human beings that were simply not possible in the era of mass media."

We all know that the old world of broadcast news, where a few privileged voices -- call them Dan, Tom and Peter -- did most of the talking and millions of people did the listening (or tuned out), is over. In its place not only do we have hundreds of cable channels to choose from, we also have literally millions of ways to talk back. Each day another 100,000 blogs are created worldwide on top of the 57 million already there. Thanks to cheap connectivity and software, mass lateral conversation has broken out in every sector of society.

But so far, most politicians haven't figured out how to adapt to this changed environment. Most are still talking down at the public, reading their talking points, trying to practice "message discipline" and using TV ads calibrated to move voters by fractions of degrees. Online, they are offering stale wine in a new bottle.

Take the presidential campaign launch of Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton, D-N.Y.

"I'm beginning a conversation -- with you, with America," she said during her online video announcement. "Let's start a dialogue about your ideas and mine."

So far, her main campaign theme is "Let the conversation begin." And Peter Daou, her Internet director, says it's been a rousing success. Her three nights of live Webcasts, he says, drew 25,000 questions and 51,000 signups; her "first town hall meeting in cyberspace" on Yahoo! Answers drew 35,000 responses from voters engaging her with questions about improving health care in America.

But what kind of conversation involves random questions followed by longish and meandering answers where the person talking never says, "Well, what do you think?" Reviews across the blogosphere were mixed. Dan Gillmor, director of the Center for Citizen Media, affiliated with the University of California, Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism and the Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University Law School, blogged, "Was this a joke? Clinton's alleged conversations with America have been so entirely scripted as to be laughable. If this is her idea of changing politics in a Webby way, we're not making much progress."

One could reasonably conclude that this "conversation" wasn't an attempt at true dialogue but rather an efficient way to collect e-mail addresses for fundraising.

Using the Internet for a top-down, one-way conversation is like using a synthesizer to play Chopsticks. Sure, it works that way, but it can do so much more. Contrast Clinton's controlled campaign online with Politicopia.com, a new site launched by state Rep. Steve Urquhart, Republican chairman of the Rules Committee of the Utah House of Representatives. Politicopia is a wiki, which means, like Wikipedia, anyone can create or edit any page. And it's devoted to detailed discussion of all the bills coming before the legislature. Though the site is only few days old, the dialogue on it is already heated, and several representatives have told Urquhart it's influencing their thinking and votes.

While it's true that no single individual could possibly talk to tens of thousands of voters daily in a normal human conversation, there's nothing stopping elected officials or candidates from using the Internet to encourage voters not only to interact with them but also to interact with each other. Thanks to the Internet, many citizens are already deeply engaged in communication with each other. When politicians decide to climb down from their pedestals and join that conversation, it will be revolutionary.

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