Campaign Strategy Newsletter 101   Brexit Values-Bubbles Edition   February 2017

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Who Needs To Cut Their Bubble Print?

In 2011 Eli Pariser of Upworthy invented the term 'Filter Bubble'. His TED talk page explained: "We get trapped in a "filter bubble" and don't get exposed to information that could challenge or broaden our worldview … this will ultimately prove to be bad for us and bad for democracy".

'Bubbling' is not new. People have always tended to select evidence and sources which reinforce their views, and hang out with the like minded where possible. Psychologists study how 'confirmation bias' encourages this, while the Victorians referred to "congenial company".

Most UK national newspaper titles and US national news networks have long shown distinct values profiles, and played to the values of their core readers or viewers but many still reached a fair way across different values groups. CDSM found that UK newspaper readers strongly selected different types of content within a newspaper (see for example in the chapters on Settlers, Prospectors and Pioneers in my book What Makes People Tick). The same happens between individual programmes within a TV channel.

But as Pariser pointed out, the use of algorithms to automatically tailor content presented to social media users is designed to create much tighter bubbles, with less chance of seeing or even finding anything contrary by actively searching. The result of these bespoke realities has alarmed many (on the losing sides) after what happened in the 2016 EU 'Brexit' Referendum and the Trump election.

In a blog The Bubble Print: A New CSR Frontier for Google and Facebook I recount a suggestion by a Corporate Social Responsibility executive I met recently, who mused that given the social downsides of creating and reinforcing such values-bubbles, the new CSR challenge for online companies should be to reduce them. They've gone some way in reducing their Carbon Footprint: now it's time to cut the Bubble Print.

Changing how online channels present reality to us is one issue, and 'bubbling' has huge implications for any campaign group trying to reach beyond the 'low hanging fruit' of its existing supporters but the most powerful counter-measures will be IRL or In Real Life.

The same blog contrasts my experiences of 'bubbles' in Cambridge (where I was in a very strong very Pioneer Remain bubble at the time of the Referendum) and Wells Next the Sea where I live (that area in general went Leave but the 'bubble' effect is far weaker). Read more, including 'What Have The Germans Ever Done For Us ?'

The Values Story of the Brexit Split
I listed some factors which seem to me important in mitigating against values differences leading to exclusive Values Bubbles in a February Three Worlds post, The Values Story of the Brexit Split (Part 1).   These were:

- (Values) *Differences are significant but rarely absolute*
- (There are) *Many shared values eg 'being a parent'*
- *Attributes nearer the centre of the map are more in common*
- *With free-choice groups tend to self-select by values activities, social networks, venues etc and so avoid conflict*
- *Social bonds of family, friendship and culture & interests*
- *Utility eg at work: Settlers perfect essential functions, Prospectors are the turbo-boosters, Pioneers the experimenters*
- *Common experiences and interdependencies eg reliance on public services, common bonds formed in national or community wide efforts, common understanding eg from media*
- *Human contact and expecting to see one another again and needing to get along*

Such factors have big implications for how we conserve or design communities, living and work places, and how we organise society, let alone campaigns. One abiding lesson of values insights is that attempts to 'reunite' across 'bubbles' or 'build bridges', will not work if values differences are attacked, rather than respected. Any 'bridges' need to be built on real 'common ground' rather than what one group thinks *ought* to be common ground. As US studies in particular now show, such 'values projection' in the form of 'political correctness' were one big contributing factor in the divides seen in the Trump/Clinton election.

Part 1 of that story traces the historic increase in Prospectors and Pioneers in the US and UK in the 'good times' before the crash/recession (leaving Settlers a minority feeling left behind), and what seems to have been a fall-back of some Prospectors to Settler World (and feeling angry and bewildered) during the recession. I argue that this left society primed so that when a 'simple choice' came along combined with the culture-changing threat of rapid immigration, it activated an authoritarian reaction from Settlers and Golden Dreamer Prospectors. Read more here. Part 2 will look at what this means now and next.

Whose Fake News?
Another in this trio of Brexit/Trump-related blogs is Why Simply Countering 'Fake News' With 'Fact Checking' May Not Work. This argues that because the underlying problem is values driven (and again facilitated but not just caused by the rise of social media, in this case creating a by-pass to the influence and practices of the 'old' news media), unless any 'fact-check' process has traction across the values groups (or bubbles), it will simply displace debates from a focus on contested 'facts' to one about the truthfulness of fact-checking systems.

Consider this for example from an article by Elizabeth Seagran summarising research by Spencer Greenberg:

> *Different approaches to language may explain why Trump and Clinton supporters had such opposite responses to their candidate's rhetoric. The two groups appear to have fundamentally different understandings of what it means to speak honestly. While Clinton supporters tend to take a very literal view of honesty, that is, getting your facts and numbers correct, Trump supporters believe that honesty has more to do with saying what is actually on your mind rather than filtering it for your audience. Clinton supporters generally value truth and accuracy, while Trump supporters care about authenticity.*

My suggestion is that to be effective, fact-checking or truth or honesty or reliability rating systems need to be trusted on values terms (by who backs them, as trusted individuals or brands etc), and to have consequences (downsides for poor performers). To get the first I suggest you probably need to go to a form of arbitration and not leave it to internal processes of, for instance, Google or the BBC. For the second, there needs to be some sort of structured and understood enforcement, such as withdrawal of advertising or legal action. This is, after all, why we have legal systems, judges, juries and the police.

By asking for 'the media' to be as honest and truthful as possible we are in effect asking for it to conduct or prioritise and reward 'exploratory thought' as opposed to 'confirmatory thought'. In his book *The Righteous Mind*, Joanthan Haidt quotes these summaries from researcher Philip Tetlock: *Exploratory Thought* is an *"evenhanded consideration of alternative points of view"*, whereas *Confirmatory Thought* is *"a one-sided attempt to rationalise a particular point of view"*.

That probably sounds familiar but the most interesting bit is that experiments reveal that for accountability (such as an *effective* truth checking system) to apply, three conditions must be met.

To quote Haidt (p 88) "*(1) decision makers learn before forming any opinion that they will be accountable to an audience, (2) the audience's views are unknown, and (3) they believe the audience is well informed and interested in accuracy".*

In these (three point) circumstances says Haidt, people "t*ry their darnedest"* to be accurate but otherwise ("*which is almost all the time"*) they revert to trying to *look* right (to the audience) rather than *be* right. Which to me, suggests that 'online' and other media need something akin to the legal system, if accuracy and truthfulness is to be a virtue rewarded. But what about authenticity? Politicians can be punished at the ballot box but perhaps they and their spinners also need to rethink their communications strategies. And then, what about campaigns?

International Politics: Back, but not as we knew it
In recent years, directors of campaign organisations have been much interested in equipping and resourcing their groups and teams to deal with the online world, social media and so on, and many have been trying to understand how to best use the waves of emerging insights into human psychology in campaigns, from nudges and values and heuristics to neuroscience and storytelling.

'Corporate campaigning' in the sense of campaigns which produce results by influencing companies rather than reaching political levers, emerged a bit earlier and has become mainstream, although with a lot less fuss.

So knowing your way around society and the human mind, took a front seat along with 'business' competence, when it came to building up assets, resources and capabilities. In contrast geopolitics and old media seemed, well, pretty much old school and a little-changing hangover from the C20th. The very idea of nation states as the prime actors in local to global affairs seemed very old hat.

Now thanks to Trump, Brexit and other developments, this context is changing and campaign groups and campaign planners need to change with it. Brexit and Trump are not the drivers of these changes despite what the media (following the reflexes of tell the easiest story and then first simplify-and-then-exaggerate) may say. The whole of the UK and US for example have not lurched 'to the right' as societies, so much as acquired governments with a mandate to act on Settler, security-driven fears, even though the majority of those populations do not share those values.

The underlying 'fundamentals' as market analysts would say, are things like real-world constraints on natural resources (45 years late, *Limits to Growth* is at least partly proved right and we have new resource politics, such as over climate change, access to land for food and energy, and water) and ageing populations in industrial nations (affecting things like finance to meet health care expectations, inter-generational equitability and cohesion, and productivity). All of those have come to a head through immigration issues, which have generated acute politics, and all that's just the start.

My point is that this has already led to some reversion to the nation-state as the best available locus of action, and a remarkably swift jettisoning of many tenets of 'Neoliberalism' in at least UK and US political circles. How it will play out nobody can say, and how TNCs or 'multinationals' will position themselves (or be positioned for example through taxation) had yet to be seen but it probably does mean that the old capital-to-capital politics is set for a revival. Expect to see more adverts for Head of Political Unit.

Campaigns Course, London 21 March
My training course on researching, planning and executing effective campaigns is going ahead in London, on 21 March. This is one of the courses hosted by Duane Raymond before the 2014 ECF Oxford Campaigning forum.

See details at http://fairsay.com/events/trainings/strategy/

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