Mass Engagement

650 million – users on WeChat in 2015
5 billion – target number of users for Facebook by 2030

Mass engagement

As the public voice becomes easier to access and harder to suppress, leaders seek to engage to create, develop, secure and maintain legitimacy for their initiatives and policies – so further reducing their hierarchical power.

Every since *homo sapiens* first appeared some 200,000 years ago, communication and engagement styles have continued to evolve. When we lived in small groups, one to one communication and gossip was enough. The agricultural and industrial revolutions enabled larger groups to form – from organisations to cities and countries. Leaders, and those in, or wanting, to keep power, needed to be able to speak to, and often control, the masses. To do this, broadcast media developed: from town criers, to, following the invention of the printing press, pamphlets, books and newspapers, to radio, TV and now to the digital era. Adjacent to this has been an evolution of engagement. In the past, engagement was rarely mass, it was atomised (e.g. a letter to a newspaper, which may or may not be published). The mass engagement that did exist was typically limited by geographical access (i.e. the ability to join a meeting, a protest, a march) or through physically collated initiatives (e.g. petitions).

Digital has changed the rules. From a Tweet or Facebook post, to joining a campaign orchestrated by Change.org or 38Degrees ("38 degrees is the angle snowflakes come together to form an avalanche – together, we are unstoppable") or a charity, mass engagement has become easier. It has enabled dispersed individuals and communities to engage and ensure their presence is heard and felt. Digital engagement can easily be made public, visible to a large audience and no longer limited to those present. Further, as the transaction cost to engagement has continued to fall, engagement can now occur on micro as well as macro issues (e.g. enabling the Arab Spring).

Digital has shifted the power dynamic, placing power in the hands of every one. As a result, in this digital era where the public voice is easier to access and tougher to suppress, it becomes harder to generate support for new initiatives without taking public views into account. Those in power are more easily held to account and less in control of the message. Their hierarchical power is weakened. So to create, develop, secure and maintain legitimacy for their initiatives and policies, leaders in all fields will need to engage to maintain public and political support.

It is worth noting that digital mass engagement varies widely across a number of dimensions. It can occur at a transactional (e.g. join X) or a conversational (e.g. what do you think about Y, which direction should be taken) level. It can also be active (e.g. here is my input on X) or passive (e.g. I allow you to access data on my location to help build a better understanding of, say, travel within a city). The strength of engagement can also vary (e.g. a "like" on Facebook or a "follow" on Twitter or WeChat; versus joining a petition to a government or making a donation on JustGiving). Leading brands are now shifting from measuring exposure and impressions to "expressions".

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Unequal access

In his book "Trust me, PR is dead", Robert Phillips, the former President and CEO EMEA of PR firm Edelman, argues that centralised communications can no longer be a fig-leaf on trust or a cover for the real actions of leaders. As Phillips writes, "In an age of individual empowerment, power is shifting from state to cities; employer to employee; corporation to citizen-consumer. Power and influence have become asymmetrical. Trust is forever fragile and attempts at control futile". Managing the message simply won't work in today's complex and interconnected world. Or, as Margaret Hefferman puts it for organisations, "Instead of talking themselves up, companies should just start doing the right thing - for real. Employ people on decent wages. Eschew stupid bonuses. Pay taxes. Care about customers. Listen. Share ownership. Stop spinning. Don't say you will - do it for real. Trust isn't a message; it's an outcome and the only way to win it is to earn it."

In this world, leaders may need to move beyond politics, profit maximization and adherence to top-down hierarchies and centralised communication. Embracing mass engagement, providing citizens and consumers the opportunity to participate in decisions, enables different, better, more understood solutions to be envisaged and created, going beyond top-down orchestrated answers. Different approaches to business and politics, adapted for this era, will need to emerge. "In this era of social and mobile technology, customers, employees, suppliers, and partners are in direct communication with one another. Those personal networks, and the brands they're passionate about, influence their decision-making and their spending.

Trust isn't a message; it's an outcome.

These new forms of digital mass engagement may also facilitate faster change (e.g. cultural change within a population) and enable new ways for research to be carried out (e.g. citizen science projects). Of course digital mass engagement is not a panacea. Micro-failings, mistakes or miscommunication may have consequences blown out of all proportion and there are examples where the speed and scale of engagement enabled are unwarranted, misplaced or misused.

Going forward it is clear that leaders and initiatives will be more easily and more readily held to account, and will need to maintain popular support in order to retain legitimacy with their audience. Autocratic leadership will become harder to sustain. There is likely to be an increase in demand for and occurrence of public engagement (e.g. referenda and single issue votes such as for the UK to remain part of the European Union) or vested party participation and interference (e.g. shareholder activism).

More mass engagement will likely require an increased willingness and ability of all parties to enter into sustained dialogue, and may also lead to a growth in trusted and validated networks for mass engagement to protect against fraud. It will also need to actively design and cater for those who are not engaged or who are left behind (e.g. those on the wrong side of the digital divide).

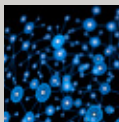*Customers, employees, suppliers, and partners are in direct communication with one another.*

Related insights

Air quality

Rising air pollution in many cities is killing people and becomes a visible catalyst for changing mind-sets and policies across health, energy, transportation and urban design.

Everything connected

Over 1 trillion sensors are connected to multiple networks: everything that can benefit from a connection has one. We deliver 10,000x more data 100x more effectively but are concerned about the security of the information that flows.

Data ownership

Individuals recognize the value of their digital shadows, privacy agents curate clients' data sets while personal data stores give us transparent control of our information: We retain more ownership of our data and opt to share it.

Truth and illusion
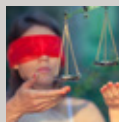
The Internet has democratised knowledge and changed the nature of who we trust and why. As confidence in large organisations declines the search for trustworthy alternatives evolves. What we believe is changing how we behave.