

**Q&A with Rory O'Connor, author of *Friends, Followers and the Future: How Social Media are Changing Politics, Threatening Big Brands, and Killing Traditional Media* (City Lights, April 15th, 2012)**

**Q: As we enter an election year, we know that candidates will be utilizing social media in addition to traditional, legacy media. Can you talk about how Obama and Rick Perry (as discussed in the book) used social media in their previous campaigns, and what new media strategies might we see taken up by the candidates this year?**

A: Following the announcement that John McCain had chosen Sarah Palin as his running mate, public interest in America's 2008 national election soared. So, too, did voter, candidate, and party reliance on new media tools--especially those that facilitated controlling one's own media. The race for the presidency, with its viral emails, social networks, user-generated videos, fact-checking web sites, MySpace and YouTube debates and other online innovations, provided an ideal prism through which to examine the rise of social media and to assess both their utility as trust filters and impact on longstanding media and political brands alike.

The political importance of the emerging media was most apparent in the successful candidacy of Barack Obama, whose online-focused campaign revolutionized modern politics in ways that are still coming into focus. No previous candidate or campaign had ever adopted technology and the Internet as the heart of its operation or used it on such a scale. Aided by MyBarackObama.com, a Facebook-like social network created with the assistance of that company's co-founder, Chris Hughes, and employing a team of young, Web-savvy programmers and developers who had cut their teeth on Howard Dean's 2004 presidential primary campaign, the underdog Obama embraced social media all the way to the White House. He used social networks to raise record-breaking amounts of money--more than \$500 million from 3 million donors who made a total of 6.5 million donations online. He also used the new media to circumvent longstanding media and political brands by communicating with his supporters directly and interactively.

"On MyBarackObama.com, or MyBO, Obama's own socnet, 2 million profiles were created," Jose Antonio Vargas noted in one Washington Post campaign post-mortem. "In addition, 200,000 offline events were planned, about 400,000 blog posts were written and more than 35,000 volunteer groups were created. . . . Some 3 million calls were made in the final four days of the campaign using MyBO's virtual phone-banking platform.

"Obama has 5 million supporters in other socnets," Vargas reported. "He maintained a profile in more than 15 online communities, including BlackPlanet, a MySpace for African Americans, and Eons, a Facebook for baby boomers. On Facebook, where about 3.2 million signed up as his supporters, a group called Students for Barack Obama was created in July 2007. It was so effective at energizing college-age voters that senior aides made it an official part of the campaign the following spring."

The Internet and emerging social media proved crucial to Obama's successful presidential campaign. Social media was transformative because it gave him the power to challenge Hillary Clinton and the establishment. Online fundraising in particular was an early equalizer, and Obama later exploited the Net in other important ways, such as field campaigning and staff organizing.

For the first time, many voters also used that same emerging media, its powerful tools and looser, more extensive social networks to communicate directly with their peers about the election. Media platforms that hadn't even existed in the previous presidential election cycle just four years earlier began to play crucial roles in campaigns and the delivery of information about them. YouTube, for example, essentially deflated the presidential hopes of Virginia Senator George Allen when it captured his "Macaca" moment. Other non-professional videos later uploaded to YouTube also went viral and had great impact on the campaigns, gaining such popularity that they were picked up and reported on by the legacy media. Prominent examples include a mash-up of Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney declaring his support for abortion and gay rights--positions he later renounced--and a spoof of the famous Apple Super Bowl Ad that compared Senator Hillary Clinton to the oppressive system described in George Orwell's "1984."

Although the Obama campaign was groundbreaking in its effort to make extensive use of the Internet, others led the way before him, such as Howard Dean in 2004. One can also point to Bill Bradley's success in persuading the Federal Elections

Commission in 1999 to match funds raised via online credit card use and John McCain then raising millions of dollars over the Internet the following year in the week after the New Hampshire primary. Bradley even posted a prescient statement on his campaign web site, predicting that a presidential election would soon be decided because of how important the Internet was.

Some Republican political operatives disagree with the notion that Republicans lagged behind Democrats in their understanding and use of the Internet and social media in 2008, but most feel that social media is now absolutely central to all political campaigns and the GOP has already seized new tools like Facebook and Twitter. In the 2010 mid-term elections, many Republicans even surpassed Democrats in their adroit use of social media, and three Republicans--Marco Rubio in Florida, Sean Duffy in Wisconsin, and Rick Perry in Texas--stood out for running the best online campaigns. Although he was an incumbent, Texas Governor Rick Perry faced a primary challenge from an establishment figure and was behind in the race. In response, he changed his tone and message to become more like the Tea Party and began to run a totally different, online-driven campaign that dramatically shifted public perception of him. There was no direct mail, no robo calls, and not a lot of television. It also helped that Perry personally is an active tweeter and sometimes spent an entire day with top bloggers. "These days, that's worth an entire day with top funders," one analyst said. "That's how tangible social media is now."

Adept use of the Internet and social media is no guarantee of political success--just ask Howard Dean. And let's not forget that while Obama raised money on the Net, he spent most of it on television--still a dominant political medium. Still, the candidate who can best tap into social will likely win in 2012--and going forward, social networks (and mobile in particular) will be hugely important. "Just being rich and throwing your weight around is not what wins campaigns anymore--instead it's your networks, organically built," one top Republican adviser says. "What wins today is being in touch and then responding to it in an authentic way. When candidates actually believe this, and participate personally, then they see its power and that gets them to believe--plus they benefit in many ways from the direct feedback. This whole new dynamic, in essence, is having a dramatic impact on all political calculations going forward."

***Q: What effect has social media, Facebook in particular, had on the way we understand and consume news?***

*A:* Legacy news media brands continue to experience precipitate declines in both audience share and advertising revenue. Meanwhile, by following a strategy to "take anything today on the Internet and overlay a lens that is the people you know and trust," social media in general and Facebook in particular are now completely disrupting the ways in which we have traditionally gotten news. In addition to leading Internet site visits, Facebook has also surpassed Google as the top source for traffic to other sites--not only to major portals like Yahoo and MSN, but also to many news media sites. Some experts say social media will become the Internet's next search engine, with Facebook and its 800 million users leading the way. Although Google and search will remain important for years to come, what we're seeing is the beginning of big changes where social networking and Facebook will further disrupt advertising, media, one-to-one and one-to-many communications, not to mention search.

The concept of "the trusted referral"--integral to the success of content sharing on Facebook--is tremendously powerful. When getting a piece of content--an article, a news clip, a video, etc--from a friend, it makes you much more likely to watch, read, and engage with the content. Although people will always look to trusted news sources and journalists for important news and current events, it is now just as important to rely on one's friends to help filter the news. When you get a news clip from a friend, he or she is putting a personal brand on the line, saying "I recommend THIS piece of content to you out of all the content that is out there"--just as they might recommend a restaurant or a movie.

Also, we now see journalists and news companies creating a significant presence on Facebook to engage with Facebook users and help facilitate this notion of the trusted referral to assist with the viral spread of content. When journalists can really engage with this audience and enlist social media users to market and share their content, it is a powerful way to share credible news and information and tap into the implicit trust that people have with their friends. Journalists are only beginning to discover what a powerful tool social media can be for their content, but more and more media companies are coming to understand the importance of allowing people to consume content anywhere they want to consume it on the web. As mentioned before, "expert" or professional journalism will not go away--people will always want a trusted opinion when it comes to news, politics, current events, and important topics--but people will increasingly rather get that content on a site they are already on, like Facebook, rather than traveling off to another site.

***Q: In the book, you posit that social media will be the conduit through which we will understand and operate, to a large degree, every aspect of our lives. Can you explain what you mean by that?***

A: Big Government, Big Business, and Big Media--they're simply not working for many of us anymore, and growing networks of deeply disenfranchised "ordinary people" are now beginning to exert extraordinary influence on societies worldwide. They are using emerging social media forms to bypass state censorship, outpace traditional news organizations, and compel corporations and governments alike to listen to and act on their demands. These new media tools, which now enable anyone to produce and distribute news and information widely, inexpensively and efficiently, attract large audiences, affect policies, politicians, and governments and even revolutionize entire industries, and are deeply disruptive because they are decentralized and democratic. Instead of relying on the legacy media, with its highly centralized, top-down mode of communication, we can now employ our own bottom-up media--including viral emails, blogs, social networks like Facebook and other young social platforms, such as the video sharing site YouTube and the micro-blogging Twitter service--to spread our messages by "word of mouse."

The accelerating impact of the Internet, and the powerful social media that have begun to dominate its use, are now rapidly transforming our political, commercial and communications environments, while profoundly affecting the future of governance and the very nature of democracy itself. No longer passive recipients of centralized news, government edicts, corporate advertising and other top-down forms of information, active users of online social media increasingly break news themselves from the bottom up--while also becoming trusted curators of and commentators on events that directly affect our lives. Considered together, the newly emerging communications technologies signal a huge shift in how we now find, consume and interact with news and information of all types. Share and share alike--the sheer numbers say it all, as literally billions of people flock to social media sites of all sorts to communicate what they deem important to their lives and that of people within their new online networks, known in social parlance as "friends" and "followers."

The ramifications of this seismic shift are tremendous. As previous structures vanish and the primacy of legacy media brands fades, revenue models and commercial relationships of the past disintegrate. Entire industries such as television, film, newspapers, magazines, and book publishing are being radically, sometimes even fatally, disrupted. The rise of the new social media will inevitably lead to the obsolescence and eventual death of any and all brands that fail to embrace and adapt to this quickly morphing mediascape.

***Q: The notion that Google could disappear or be replaced is truly difficult to imagine, but is something you predict as quite likely. Can you explain?***

A: For all its success, by the end of 2010 Google faced a host of problems. The company's awesome power and reach proved to be a double-edged sword; competitors and regulators alike assailed it for a series of antitrust and privacy violations and began demanding remedies. At the same time its Web supremacy came under attack by new competitors such as Facebook and Twitter, as "social" began to replace "search" as a focus of online activity, and Google lagged behind in what was fast becoming the most engaging and potentially lucrative online phenomenon of all. With "social" taking the place of "search" as a primary means of finding credible news and information--rather than use Google's "pull" model, which offers numerous links in response to a single query, social media allow for a more efficient "push" model, where friends and followers deliver fewer but more targeted and trusted answers--the process of searching will shift power to individuals using social tools to express their opinions, unlike Google's methodology, which relies on web links to rank results. This change will democratize and humanize the search process by using friends and followers instead of algorithms to provide context to and filters for our ever-expanding amount of information.

Moreover, even as Google executives struggle to cope with the social media challenge, other threats await them. With its massive brand appeal, consumer watchdogs consider the firm "an ideal target" and have urged antitrust agencies on both sides of the Atlantic to scrutinize its activities much more closely. As the company expanded into businesses beyond search and advertising, regulators began to take a closer look and launched investigations aimed at ensuring that the search giant could not act unfairly toward either consumers or competitors. Once again issues of privacy and power came to the fore, as concerns over Google's "antisocial social network" Buzz banged into questions about trust and antitrust.

The unspoken fear within the company is that it could soon begin to resemble Microsoft, the once-dominant technology company that now is widely perceived as stodgy and past its prime. Indeed, for all its success, Google is no longer considered by many engineers as the most desirable place to work in Silicon Valley; the new generation of social media firms has

stolen its thunder. In recent years, Google has lost scores of top programmers--along with a string of high-profile senior executives, most notably including Sheryl Sandberg, now chief operating officer at Facebook.

Whatever the reality, the perception of Google's primacy clearly has changed; even top executives like Eric Schmidt have worried aloud whether "The halo is off." The botched launch of Buzz, the patchwork fixes to search, and the non-essential feel of Google+, its latest attempt at social networking, all shone new light on Google's vulnerability to the emerging social media. They also intensified suspicions that, like Microsoft and other technology giants before it, Google was deliberately trying to use its dominance in one area to increase its presence in other new and important markets and, as the Financial Times put it, "it is not too concerned about whose feet it treads on in the process."

Despite their efforts to maintain dominance in search while still playing catch-up in social, Google's founders face a new and growing credibility gap. "The problem," the Times of London noted, "Is that while everyone knows Google's corporate motto is 'Don't be evil,' not everyone believes it any more." If Google wants to preserve the power of its brand and keep the trust of its users, its executives will have to work much harder to convince us they truly have the best interests of consumers at heart. But antagonizing previously loyal users is only one of Google's problems; its actions have also put at risk trust relationships with business partners and, perhaps most importantly, regulators. If Google fails to address these concerns adequately--and soon--even the world's most powerful and successful Internet brand could find itself toppled from its perch.

***Q: With the diminishment of much traditional media, newspapers in particular, what advice would you offer to editorial directors and producers to get their content in the public eye? And, what advice would you give to a student interested in a career in journalism?***

*A:* The best advice I can give anyone in the news business is immediately to go to the Web--to go digital first, to embrace social media, and to abandon old forms and formulas. With revenue, valuation, staffing, ratings, circulation and other key metrics still plummeting for most legacy news media, in the face of continuing cutbacks, layoffs and buyouts, and with both audiences and advertising rapidly migrating to the Internet, there's really no choice. A recent Pew report on the state of the news media concluded that the industry was in "a race against the clock for survival." The trend is clear: audiences now consume their news in new ways. They hunt and gather what they want when they want it, use search to comb among destinations and share what they find through a growing network of social media.

The bottom line: legacy media brands, while still quite powerful, are busy dying; they can no longer expect consumers/viewers/readers/users to come to them but must instead learn to anticipate audience needs better by listening to their social signals. Those that embrace the new changes will thrive; those that don't will not survive. As we no longer trust brands, we will instead discover more and more content through people and networks we trust.

My message to young people interested in journalism careers is one of optimism and opportunity. Despite all the justifiable gloom and doom about the current state of the news industry, I actually believe there has never been a better or more exciting time to enter the field of journalism. Everything is changing; that means that everything is up for grabs in ways that only happen once in a generation--if that. Young people who are "Digital Natives" and have grown up using the new media as a matter of course have an advantage now and should seize it--and the time. New forms of communicating, and new companies to enable it, are springing up every day; barriers to entry in the field are lower than they have ever been. If you don't like the news, why not just make some of your own--and then distribute it all over the world to your friends and followers at the speed of light?