The Past Is Prologue: 4 Cases For An Old Approach to New Media

Jonathan Salem Baskin

"Whereof what's past is prologue; what to come, in yours and my discharge."
William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, early 17th century

Though spoken with an eye toward doing mischief, the idea that what's past is prologue means that history's givens literally set the stage for the future. It isn't determinant, but rather a context within and from which the characters in a play—or we of the real world—can create or change anything.

This was a simple statement of fact to 17th century theater audiences, as it was an Enlightenment tenet already at the core of science, economics, the arts, political theory, and military planning. They knew that what worked in the past wouldn't automatically work again, and often would do the exact opposite—as today's moviemakers often discover when they remake a plot line—but that understanding of not just *what* happened but *why* was crucial to making better forward-looking decisions.

So isn't it a little strange that history is utterly absent from most conversations about new media, and social technologies in particular?

"Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."
Georges Santayana, *The Life of Reason*, 1905

Why are our conversations about conversation oddly ahistorical? I believe it's because we've got it into our heads that technology has fundamentally changed consumers individually and society overall. Prior experience is no longer valid because the rules need to be rewritten out of whole cloth; we must abruptly shift from old ways of doing things to new ones. Our times aren't *evolutionary* but rather *revolutionary* in which every preconceived notion about how, where, when, and why people communicate (and subsequently buy things) is necessarily wrong by definition.

Perhaps what we're experiencing isn't an exception to the experiences of past generations, but rather another opportunity do things we human beings have always done... only faster, more broadly, etc.

Today's conventional wisdom is that social behaviors first emerged with Internet Relay Chat in the 1980s and then flourished once the World Wide Web was opened to consumers in 1991. Before then, we lived lives of disconnected lonely ignorance in a world run by manipulative one-way authorities of businesses and governments.

I wrote my new book, *Histories of Social Media,* to explore a different premise: namely, that technology has always been an agent of change, but that it's less a source of, and more lens for, human experience. The simple fact is that there were social behaviors *before* the technologies we today

possess—or, put differently, the innovations of the telegraph, steam engine, and printing press effected changes that were as profound then as computers and the Internet are to us now.

Perhaps what we're experiencing isn't an exception to the experiences of past generations, but rather another opportunity do things we human beings have always done... only faster, more broadly, etc. Certainly our technology is also contributing novel changes to how we live, but I wonder if those instances are circumstantial to the more fundamental behaviors that prompt them.

Applying these lessons of history to today's social media planning might yield better (or at least different) insights, and ignoring this knowledge leaves business leaders bereft of an extensive track record of what works, what doesn't work, and why.

In fact, history provides antecedents for every behavioral, cultural, and commercial quality we ascribe to our latest social media technologies, such as:

- **Crowdsourcing.** Medieval villagers used it to learn about treatments for the Black Death long before consumers submitted online ideas for new soda pop flavors.
- **Engagement.** 19th century industrial unions delivered activism in ways that make "friending" a product or service little more than a joke.
- **Conversation.** The Romans ran their government with it, while the French Terror used it to murder thousands.
- **Debate.** People have jousted and dueled for centuries.

The past is indeed prologue, and here are 4 tips for your next strategy meeting courtesy of *The Histories of Social Media*.

Case # 1: Beware the Crowd

"You frivolous, feeble, and cowardly folk, whose love of novelty is a mania and whose taste for greatness is a passing fancy... you who have no inspiration, no plan and no principles; who prefer clever flattery to advice, who fail to recognize your true champions and trust the word of any casual stranger... you whose projects and plans of vengeance are always made on the spur of the moment; who can always produce an isolated effort, but are incapable of sustained energy... must you always be treated like grown children?"
Jean-Paul Marat, 1743–1793

Until about a decade ago, the claim that crowds are inherently intelligent or beneficial would have made any thoughtful person laugh out loud. A few millennia of experience had taught successive generations that the idea wasn't just wrong but actively stupid:

- Finding the lowest common denominator works great in simple math but rarely leads to practical or good insights in politics.
- Beliefs of an unqualified large group are a poor substitute for the factual insights of the qualified few, such as in the sciences (i.e. when facts matter).
- Crowds are inherently undemocratic, and they usually become more authoritarian than the institutions they displace, and…
- Their conversations tend to dissolve the distinctions between fact and fiction, making meaningful or useful consensus less possible over time.

Now, of course, these truisms no longer apply. Technology has changed everything, and our new *mechanisms* for crowds to organize and communicate mean that the *substance* of their behavior

will be fundamentally different—and better. There's some reason to believe in this idea, insomuch that a medium does influence the message (the content of Twitter is dictated in large part by the 140-character posting limit, as an extreme example). But the presumption that an anonymous crowd possesses some inherent wisdom that surpasses the insights of smaller groups or individuals who've been qualified by experience remains much more of a belief than a fact.

This is especially true when you look at branding and marketing. Almost every experiment in crowdsourced advertising has failed to produce stuff that's any better than what expert agencies can create (it's usually worse). Most social campaigns that use UGC (user-generated content) have to rely on consumers talking about themselves and not the products or services they're nominally supposed to promote. The only way results from these efforts make sense is if we change the rules and metrics for marketing, which is exactly what often happens. Usually there's another marketing activity going on that prompts the crowd with discount coupons or the promise of prizes (i.e. the crowd as consuming audience, which isn't a new idea whatsoever).

When Marat, who was one of the architects of the French Revolution, wrote so disparagingly about the crowd, he could have just as easily been describing a Facebook fan page, or chatroom conversation thread. We've understood the crowd's limits for a long, long time.

The conclusions of history are not that the crowd is inherently bad, however; it is just that it's not inherently *good*, either. Crowds don't know how to run your company better than you do, however glibly and politically correct it might feel, and they don't "own" your brands—you do. Together, you share experiences, but it's up to your leadership to think strategically about what, why, when, where, and for how long you want to involve the crowd in your business. Those who advise you to simply embrace the concept do so in service of a hope, not with understanding of history.

Tip #2: Networks Aren't Only Online

Individuals and communities have been linked by various networks throughout history. Few of these linkages were dedicated "communications" media, yet all of them served such functions. Now that we have the specialized medium of the Internet available to us, we tend to believe that it's the first such network. It's not.

In fact, the lessons of history regarding networks are twofold:

- Networks exist to support the myriad ways people can interact, from schools and businesses, to urban infrastructure and religion. The media for communicating via these networks is primarily *experiential* and an organic outcome of the networks' operation, and…
- Dedicated communications media usually depend on and are reflective of, and not a substitute for, these other networks.

The 1950s give us a perfect example of societies that were richly immersed in crisscrossing networks of experience, yet we rarely talk about them as such. Our communications-media bias doesn't "see" them. Yet people shared, compared, referred, transacted, and otherwise collaborated on their experiences through a variety of real-world networks; they were as wired as we are, only somewhat differently (and without the Ethernet cables).

"When you help someone up a hill, you find yourself closer to the top."
Brownie Wise, 1913–1992

American businesswoman Brownie Wise perfected perfected the process we now call multi-level marketing, or "MLM," through her development of Tupperware Parties in the middle part of the 20th century.

Consider this networking behavior for a moment:

- The social qualities of the parties were immense. In addition to the obvious benefits derived from having fun, the product interaction was social, not one-way. People shared their experiences of the products and not just the products themselves.
- Partygoers shared their knowledge and appreciation of Tupperware with one another, which then allowed them to support one another's buying decisions. This was group-buying before anybody had a term for it; housewives got together and collaborated on understanding a potential purchase and then shared in the discounts/supportive benefits of taking said action.
- Then they told family and friends, as satisfied party attendees became evangelists for the Tupperware experience, not just promoters of the functional attributes of the products. Ultimately, the products were plastic bowls with lids, but the social component of the party experience elevated them into much more.
- By allowing customers to become dealers themselves, Wise's system had a built-in growth mechanism. She blurred the line between "seller" and "buyer," effectively turning the experience into something collaborative and, again, supportive.

Add to this approach the reality of media consumption itself in the 1950s, which was anything but "one-way." Networks of broadcast TV, radio, newspapers, magazines, live events, and "found" appearances interacted to create *transmedia* experiences of narratives and stars a good half-century before the label was invented.

So whatever networks you hope to create online probably represent a small fraction of the actual networks that influence your customers.

In general, the lessons of history are that reality trumps imagination, so it's from these "real" networks that the information that influences the "imaginary" ones emerge; and the places networks cross and/or interact are probably as important as the networks themselves, because it's at these points that truths are checked and validated.

For all the time you spend brainstorming how to create more of an online presence, perhaps it makes sense to revisit all the networks at your disposal?

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Tip #3: Get Ready for Real Engagement

People have been joining clubs and showing up for meetings since time began; attracting members and giving them little to do (or asking from them little or nothing) is easy, and it's nothing new. History suggests that what comes next is the hard part.

"What does labor want? We want more schoolhouses and less jails, more books and less arsenals, more learning and less vice, more constant work and less crime, more leisure and less greed, more justice and less revenge."
Samuel Gompers, 1850–1924

The Industrial Revolution was a social and economic as well as a technological event, as it changed the lives of millions as they moved into cities (or created new ones altogether) to find work at the new factories. These travelers brought the habits of rural communal life with them, yet found themselves occupied as literal cogs in assembly line machinery. This was in large part the spark for the creation of industrial worker unions, and they invented a new model for engagement:

- **They focused content on an "in here" not "out there."** Like the era's religious experience, trade unions took big picture ideas and made them very personal (you can see similar behaviors in medieval villages); unionism was less about letting individuals engage with broader themes than it was about bringing those themes down to a very personal level. It was a fact that the world was big and unjust, and these organizations represented focused efforts to carve out meaning within that context, and not necessarily try to change it overall (though the rhetoric of revolution certainly drew on such themes). Unions were about what "we" wanted, not first or necessarily what a "they" should do or not.
- **They talked about production, not consumption.** Unions weren't necessarily communities of choice but rather of necessity, or at least that's how they positioned themselves.

Their issues (wages, work conditions, etc.) were unavoidable aspects of their members' lives; it's like the difference between opting in or out of a program or service. Workers were already "in" by default so it was easier, or perhaps more obviously meaningful, to claim to address that involvement. Like the "in here" perspective noted above, unions focused on what its members did, not just what they thought or believed.

- **They advocated purposes and goals.** Governments and employers spent close to a century trying to crush or limit the ideas propagated by union activism, which only served to refine the unions' organizational purposes and goals. Years of suppression (and often self-imposed irrelevance) taught them that angry speeches full of applause lines weren't enough to warrant attendance and dues; there had to be not only immediate goals (as well as longer term objectives) but also a sense of forward progress toward them. Unions had to become communities of action and movement.

- **They required a quid pro quo from members.** There were real and significant costs associated with union membership, from the payment of dues to the risks of employer punishment that could include physical violence (such as what happened during strikes). This served to accomplish a number of things for the unions: It filtered out those members who weren't really interested; it gave the meetings and agreed actions a sense of importance; and it kept the entities honest toward their stated purposes. Arguably, like investors putting money away for a future rainy day, many of the benefits for which union activism worked in the late 1800s were never really enjoyed broadly until much later. There was a serious investment involved in union membership.

Contrast this level of engagement with your most engaging social media marketing campaign, and you can immediately see the possibilities for real involvement that you're leaving on the table (or that your brand could experience from truly motivated consumer groups). What do you do with/for your customers that actually matters to them... so much so that they'll actually do something, even pay something, for the privilege of collaborating with your brand? *Free* isn't the new *paid*, it's still just the old *valueless*.

Tip #4: Entertainment Isn't Branding

"He only employs his passion who can make no use of his reason."
Marcus Tullius Cicero, 106–43 BCE

Gladiatorial combat in ancient Rome was more than pure entertainment; it was wedded to some of the central myths and founding beliefs of Roman society. The spectacle itself had inherent meaning as a mechanism for the expression of the Roman "experience," through such qualities as:

- **Scripted entertainment.** A day at a coliseum was less competition and more pageant, as there was little question whether the animals would survive the morning slaughter or that convicts wouldn't expire on the crosses to which they'd been nailed. Think less baseball's World Series and more WWE wrestling match.
- **Participatory ritual.** It's not hard to imagine the routine of applause or heckling that must have accompanied each day's violence. There was little to no room for nuanced experiences, no complicated dialogue or plot to follow and quietly interpret. Spectators would yell their thumbs up or thumbs down opinions at set moments, ranking the performance as consumers of content more than creators or collaborators.
- **Consumer culture.** All conversations are transactions of one form or another, and the conversation that took place at gladiatorial contests was all about consumption. There was no broader outcome to what took place there, and nothing to which people needed to give their consistent or subsequent attention. Within the walls of a coliseum, citizens were entertained. They did what they were told to do.

The idea of entertainment devoid of meaning or any connection to the context of real experience is a rather recent, mass-media invention.

The various aspects of peoples' lives have been far more integrated for most of history; even the 20th century gave us early television that integrated commercial and entertainment content without distinctions (actual "commercial breaks" were a later innovation) and the state-controlled propaganda of Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia produced entertainment that was intricately woven into social and political narrative.

This makes the new rules for understanding online social behavior somewhat suspect, I think, especially the premise that ideas need to be stripped of any real meaning so as to be entertaining. We celebrate the medium over the message, and perhaps confuse involvement with the former as a viable substitute for experience of the latter. At no other time in about two thousand years of history would such a premise make sense... which begs the question of why should it now?

No amount of funny substitutes for meaningful and useful truth. That doesn't mean your campaigns need to be serious and dour; rather, the challenge is to make the truth engaging.

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The Past Is Prologue

We live on the cusp of the future that is just as tantalizing and frustrating (and novel) as the futures of every generation that has come before us. Every era occurs at the pinnacle of history. Ours is only the latest.

As such, even our most ingenious and amazing inventions are not separate or exclusive from past expressions of brilliance. Social media is no exception; if we commit to exploring the social behaviors that got us where we are, we might do a better job of mapping our plans and expectations of the future against the new social technology tools now available.

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An "old" approach to strategizing new media would entail:

- **Purpose before platform.** The reasons for social experiences would be the starting point of any strategy: what real-world outcomes are we trying to achieve? Sell products, get elected, prompt membership in our NGO. Where these purposes were then realized would be secondary, and you might discover that the right places aren't necessarily the ones you might have initially thought.
- **Link to prior and post behaviors.** What occurs through whatever social campaign you're considering is probably less important than the behaviors on which it draws and those it subsequently prompts (or leads to). It's really not meaningful to have a social success, but rather to be involved in ongoing successful social behaviors.

- **Use existing metrics, not new ones.** It's probably not smart to invent new expectations or measurements for social strategies, in that they should build on what you know to be true vs. replace it. Further, history suggest that activities have always been social, so the challenge is to discover the common threads (content and numbers) that matter to *all* of your behaviors, not just those that fit in a neat online creative package.

The past is prologue, just as social media aren't new. If you look past technology and use an "old" approach, it might help save you time reenacting scenes from the past... and allow you to focus on writing social strategies that are truly Shakespearean!

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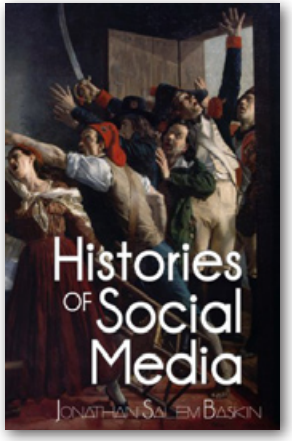

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Jonathan Salem Baskin produces a daily blog and podcast entitled *Today in the Histories of Social Media* and the award-winning marketing blog, *Dim Bulb*, contributes regularly to the CMO Strategy section of *Advertising Age*, serves as a Senior Fellow of the Society for New Communications Research, and was recently named to the Blogger Board of SocialMediaToday.com. He has 29 years of client and agency marketing communications experience. His previous books were *Branding Only Works on Cattle* (Business Plus, 2008) and *Bright Lights & Dim Bulbs* (iUniverse, 2009). Jonathan lives in Chicago, Illinois.

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