A techno-revolutionary trip on the internet

Reflections on the lessons from Dean for America

Tom Chance

When I think about American presidential elections, three things come to mind: money, corporate power and disenfranchisement. One of the big political stories of our time is the decline of party politics, especially for the young. But another story is that of the internet revitalising democracy, empowering and connecting citizens in a new, vibrant space. Often Utopian, theoretical and romanticised, this vision of the future was made real in the race for the Democratic presidential candidacy recently in America by Howard Dean. With a campaign team numbering in the hundreds of thousands mobilising over the internet, Dean went from being a no-hoper to pole position in a matter of months.

The campaign manager credited with much of this success, Joe Trippi, wrote a book recounting the experience and his lessons for America, under the provocative title: *The revolution will not be televised: democracy, the internet and the overthrow of everything*. Trippi's big idea is that the internet is going to totally change American politics, in part returning it to a golden era of localised engagement while also propelling it into a bright new future of decentralised participation. In this article, I reflect on some of the wider issues he tackles and try to understand the implications for representative democracies and their established organisations. Because of the enormity of the subject area, I'm simply going to step past the many activities happening outside the mainstream.

First, I should recount some of the facts of his campaign. They started with very little money, a tiny campaign team and a candidate with no real chance of winning. When hired in as a new campaign manager because of his decades of experience, Trippi immediately started to make some changes. His first was to leverage a web site called Meetup, a social networking site where people registered their location and an interest in meeting about some subject—in this case Howard Dean. The web site would suggest a time and location, and so people began to meet and discuss ways to help the Dean campaign. The more Trippi's team ceded control to volunteers on the internet, the more the campaign became successful, to the point where he was the front runner for a short period of time. He was eventually brought down, ironically, by the mainstream media.

Breaking down the broadcast media

To understand Trippi's book, and many other arguments to do with the internet, you need to understand the difference between broadcast and multicast media. Television, radio, newspapers and other "traditional" media *broadcast* information at the consumer. Any opportunity to feed your ideas back to the media, and to have others hear your views, tend to be trivial. Examples include a "points of view" programme, a "letters to the editor" page or live comments sent in from mobile phones. The internet, Trippi suggests, is fundamentally different because it is *multicast*, which is to say that information comes from many outlets and you are free to add your own. Blogs covering politics, for example, will

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necessarily provide a far wider range of views and generally allow you to comment directly on articles, start debates or even start up your own web site or blog to counter opinions you disagree with.

Trippi suggests that the broadcast media have subverted democracy and that the internet will "overthrow everything". That's a little hyperbolic. Rather, as the centralised corporate broadcast media have taken an increasingly central role in democratic discourse—telling us what the political parties think, deciding what constitutes news, and so on—that discourse has been subverted. We may still discuss politics around the dinner table, at the pub or at the workplace, but our relationship with politicians is marked by our *consuming* their ideas and the media's interpretation. We are in a sense no longer citizens unless we get involved with certain mainstream political organisations, which often provide little scope for genuine participation and grassroots influence.

Worse still, because politicians and their parties tend to only get short media spots with which to communicate their message, they become simplified. In the US elections political adverts tend to be no longer than thirty seconds. How can a candidate possibly convey their complex programme of policies and opinions in that time frame? The answer is that they can't, and so instead the choose to emote, to whip up fear or anger, and to vilify the opposition. As with many other aspects of politics, the power to do this depends upon money; good adverts take a lot of funding; "opposition research folders" needed for attack ads take additional time and expertise. So parties and campaigns become ever more geared towards winning the allegiance of rich donors, leaving the people behind.

Trippi appeals to this dystopian vision to emphasise the power of his "peoples' campaign", but it is (perhaps intentionally) misleading. People simply aren't this apathetic and apolitical, their political interests just tend to manifest themselves outside of the mainstream, where the media lens fails to reach. The broadcasted message is that local politics, such as a campaign to save a well-loved building, is fundamentally different to national politics, and that both are declining.

> Broadcast media turn citizens into consumers, while the internet can help reassert their role in the democratic process

Into this valley of death strode Trippi and his cohort of internet entrepreneurs. While his writing is a little dramatic, Trippi's team was truly innovative. Though the Dean for America campaign still ran the traditional media ads, they saw an opportunity to use the internet to break this lock, both for the good of democracy and their campaign. The big idea is that web sites are cheap to set-up and can be opened up in any number of ways to encourage participation. Trippi's team blogged about their work, read feedback and responded to it; they encouraged activists to set-up local meetings via the innovative social networking web site, Meetup; they showcased others' work, and promoted efforts that went far beyond their own designs. They turned the logic of politics on its head, from a one-to-many relationship in which a politician leads the masses, into a many-to-many network of citizens engaging in issues and choosing a politician to represent and lead this discourse.

Of course, the internet is still open to the abuse of the broadcast media because it can replicate the broadcast methodology. Consider that when Xerox first designed graphical user interfaces, they made them resemble a secretary's office, with folders, documents, a waste bin and so on. Rather than working on an innovative interface that would change

the way we work, they chose to adapt new technology to old methodologies. Similarly, most politicians use web sites to simply broadcast their message, replicating the methodologies of television campaigning on the internet. Indeed, Dean's campaign team was reluctant even to link to the Meetup web site from their own until Trippi convinced them otherwise; when they did the numbers on Meetup shot up. The obvious point here is that it is not the technology alone, the internet and web sites, that will revitalise democracy.

Their decision introduced a new dynamic to their campaign, one that made it ever more democratic and open. As they became increasingly dependent upon participation for momentum, so they were forced to spend more time and effort working in that area. From the moment the Meetup link went live on the official web site, Trippi says, the people took over the campaign. First thousands, then tens of thousands, then hundreds of thousands of people were registering to meet up; over 180 campus groups were started; millions of dollars were raised not through pandering to the interests of the rich but by appealing to the civic spirit of Dean's supporters. At its height "the discussion was the campaign", and the hundreds of thousands of volunteers were dwarfing the brainpower and efforts of the thirty-odd official campaign team.

Transforming the internet and the dinosaurs

One of Dean's slogans was: "you have the power", reflecting his belief in a new kind of politics. Like many disillusioned with the bureaucratic modern political parties, the Dean campaign wanted to get away from *transactional* politics, where politicians negotiate deals, to *transformational politics*, where politicians empower citizens to work together towards a common cause. The internet provided them with the tools to mobilise on a national scale, where previously grassroots politics had generally happened on a far more local scale. The status of a presidential campaign, and the fact that Dean's message was so different to the standard Democratic party line, saw people flocking to his cause.

Young people were a big surprise. Called "deanie babies", they pushed the grassroots campaign forward more than any other demographic, with some even travelling vast distances across the country to sleep on the office floor and work 17 hour days. Trippi hadn't seen anything like it since Bobby Kennedy in the 1960s. While some like to romanticise the internet as an underground that is undermining the dinosaurs of politics, what was significant about Dean's campaign is that it was relevant to the kids. They tapped a mainstream organisation into an apparently apathetic demographic and found that the kids *wanted* to be engaged, but that they were alienated by middle aged baby boomers who had obviously forgotten their youth. So obsessed with their "apathetic youth" frame were these politicians and media moguls that they began to ridicule the deanie babies as extremist left-wing vegans—an unfair characterisation by Trippi's account—when they should have been praising them for their involvement.

Civic involvement spread beyond the confines of Dean's bid for the Democrat nomination. Bloggers and Meetup aficionados organised "Dean Corps", which Trippi describes as "a sort of low-impact, weekend Peace Corps… they got together in neighbourhoods to clean up riverbanks, to read to children, and to collect food for homeless people". It's not as though Trippi's team used the internet to invent the notion of civic community participation; they didn't even come up with the idea of combining the two. Given the tools to organise them, and the profile to attract enough attention, people took it upon themselves to organise and participate in all kinds of community activities that would have the likes of Margaret "there's no such thing as society" Thatcher running for cover.

Dean's campaign was, in American campaigning jargon, "insurgent" because he started with apparently no hope of success. His team took his party and his opponents, lumbering dinosaurs in comparison, by surprise. The campaign may well be the first ripple in a series of waves that wash away levels of bureaucracy and corruption in representative democracies. At least, that's what Trippi would have us believe. At the very least we can place this series of events in a wider context to see how change is happening. For this we can look on the other side of the Atlantic to Britain.

The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), one of the largest and most respected in its field, and also one of the oldest organisations in *broadcasting*, is embracing open technology and content like no other comparable organisation. They have been opening up their web sites with RSS, XML and APIs; they are starting to release their archives under a Creative Commons-based license; they have even been developing their own video compression and transmis-

sion technology in a series of new free software projects, rather than doing it all in-house and "protecting" their work with patents and proprietary software licenses. Their strategy is not only opening the corporation up technologically but also socially, encouraging civic participation in the public institution whether through their developers' network, their web-based collaborative projects or the imperative to remix implicit in their Creative Archive.

But you would be wrong to assume that some top executives in the BBC have decided and decreed that the BBC must embrace the digital era. Rather, small groups of visionaries are working towards that vision in their department, and the cumulative effect is that the lumbering dinosaur of public service broadcasting is in fact evolving faster than its commercial competitors. Those visionaries made some ripples that have turned into a wave, just as Dean's team may have done in politics. The core message of Trippi's book could almost read like a guide book to corporations wanting to adopt the free software community's approach. Free software hackers used free software as the basis for the Dean campaign web site. Slowly these interests are coming together—free & open technology, participatory politics and the mainstream—to change our world.

Will demonstrations become a thing of the past thanks to the internet? Photo by dustpuppy. Released under the Creative Commons Attribution license

Trippi's seven rules for internet activism

1. Be first
2. Keep it moving
3. Use an authentic voice
4. Tell the truth
5. Build a community
6. Cede control
7. Believe again

Are we heading towards an anarchistic utopia?

If you're like me, you would have put down Trippi's book having finished it thinking: "the internet is the first technology that truly gives people full access to knowledge… we can accomplish anything … [I] have the power!" That's a selection of the claims Trippi makes in the last page. Part of the problem with his book, and that of many writers in the field, is that he is an unabashed technophile. Because his purpose in the book is to sell his Big Idea and to enthuse us with his success, he doesn't spend much time looking at where the internet might be bad for democracy, nor the extent to which it is the internet specifically, and not other factors, that led to his success. Of course he's not so stupid as to suggest that it is the internet alone—his emphasis on his team's strategy makes that clear—but he is still uncritical in his appraisal.

This is not new. According to Douglas Kellner:

> "…film, for instance, was celebrated by some of its early theorists as providing new documentary depiction of reality, even redemption of reality, generating a challenging art form and novel modes of mass education and entertainment. But film was also demonized from the beginning for promoting sexual promiscuity, juvenile delinquency and crime, violence, and copious other forms of immorality" (Douglas Kellner, New Technologies and Alienation: Some Critical Reflections (`http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner`))

Trippi is rightly critical of the mainstream broadcast media for the mediocrity of much of its content and for the very

Hopefully internet campaigning will make balloons unnecessary. Photo by Tom Chance. Released under the Creative Commons Attribution license

nature of its transmission. But while television can be uncritical, biased and unengaging, so can the internet. Many blogs are every bit as bad as the worst of the broadcast media, and an active minority can gain disproportionate power on the internet just as easily as through the broadcast media, given the right infrastructure. Almost 2500 years ago, Plato warned of the powerful speaker, the dictatorship of orators, who can whip up a frenzy amongst communities. Would Trippi have been so rapt if an ultra-conservative candidate had done the same, bringing hundreds of thousands of people forward to campaign against everything he thinks is important, or would he have engaged more critically with the issues he has raised?

So let's summarise some of these issues quickly. The internet can foster a sense of community, of civic participation and belonging to a mainstream political party. It provides a significant source of fundraising, though generally only for candidates in the main political parties. But television still reaches more voters, it broke Dean's candidacy and those who benefit from the power imbalances it creates are unlikely to simply give up their position when the internet becomes the main mode of communication. Of course the internet, both in terms of the technology and the social and political practices associated with it, are evolving.

What will this future look like? We can find some answers by looking at the cutting edge in mainstream politics today. Already, some politicians in the UK use blogs that allow comments, and actually respond to comments posted. The people behind the Dean campaign software have been working on CivicSpace, "an integrated and extensible platform of online organising tools for all manner and size of organisations". Though no political party in any election that I am aware of has replicated Dean's successful use of the internet, it must surely be a matter of time. A promising development in Europe is Greensnet (`http://www.greensnet.org`), which will try to link together all European green organisations, parties and individuals in a grassroots activism network using similar software to CivicSpace.

To answer my own question, the future is very unlikely to be an anarchistic Utopia any time soon. So long as mainstream organisations adapt to the internet, the political spaces on the internet will probably adapt to their presence; if the parties can really change the way they interact with people online, then people previously lost to the world of mainstream politics will reintegrate the parties into their lives. Challenges from outside these norms, from organisations and collectives using the internet for radical politics, will continue to shape those political spaces but so long as the dinosaurs evolve they won't replace them. The challenge for all of us who are both technically minded and politically aware is to ensure that the internet continues to be a tool for empowerment rather than a tool for control, to push the mainstream in the same direction that Trippi took Dean's wing of the Democratic party. We won't see a technorevolution, but we might just form a revolt that will change politics forever.

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