

By Jason Winders, MES'10

# Building the perfect beast

Alex Paterson offers campaign insights from the digital edge



**A**lex Paterson never wanted to control the beast; he simply wanted to keep it fed. And as a member of the Liberal Party's digital campaign team during the 2015 Federal Election, he saw firsthand what that would take.

"You have all these people out there, all these people who want to support you and your campaign online. You need to give them tools to defend you, to work with you, to do just that," said Paterson, BA'08 (Media and Public Interest). "Your supporters are looking to you to provide them with stuff. Give it to them."

In Canadian politics, pundits of all political stripes saw the Liberal Party campaign, led by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, as a triumph of new thinking in new media. It was no longer a matter of taking a traditional political campaign and cramming it into a new space, but using new tools to create new ways of campaigning and, perhaps more importantly, new ways of understanding a candidate.

"As opposed to packaging or focus-group testing a candidate, what we did was use digital tools particularly well to bring people to see who he really was, to get people used to who he was as a leader. We embraced who Justin is," Paterson said. "People are pretty shrewd online; people know they are being sold to in politics. But that doesn't make the job of selling a nefarious one."

"Instead of packaging a candidate to go and meet the people where they are, on social media and digital campaigning, you can bring people to where your leader is."

Inside the Liberal team, Paterson describes a nimble digital shop, focused on a well-defined plan, but also reactive to the ever-changing landscape of a political campaign by using a room full of not just traditional communications people, but graphic designers, video production



managers, and animators.

“You cannot run a campaign without a solid digital plan. It does not guarantee success if you have one, but it guarantees failure if you don’t have one.”

Paterson, who among numerous duties manned the campaign’s Facebook page during the debates, was recruited to the campaign from Training for Progress, a not-for-profit organization he co-founded that educated more than 100 progressive campaigners on campaigning in the 21st century. His message to them in class was the same on the campaign trail – a strong sense of ‘self.’

“If you know Justin, and his approach to people and to politics, there was no disconnect to his presence online. It was very much packaged around who he is,” Paterson said. “If you looked at other campaigns, they were swinging in the dark. What is going to stick – maybe if we go down this road, maybe if we try to make it more like this? I am not saying we didn’t make adjustments during our campaign, but it all started with a very strong sense of self and a strong voice online – and that will always matter.”

In 2008, then-U.S. Sen. Barack Obama and his team drafted a blueprint for campaigning in the age of social media. In 2012, that team improved on it. That changing landscape was just dawning when the Guelph, Ont.-raised Paterson was drawn to Western’s Media, Information and Technoculture program.

“I won’t pretend I didn’t think the program sounded cool and that’s what drew me to it,” he laughed. “But the more I thought about it, a long-view on where media was headed, the idea of locking myself into a one-dimensional journalism path became less appealing. When given a choice, there was Western, already thinking about media in every since of the term.”

Since Western, Alex has spent the last decade working in communications, campaigns and public policy. He jumped from his “dream job” as a CBC Newsworld producer to take on a job with Greenpeace, running the environmental activist agency’s communications on everything from the G-8 Summit in Toronto to Oil Sands tours for international media. He was drawn into the political arena while pursuing a master’s degree in Ottawa.

“This place has an inertia toward The Hill,” Paterson said.

Today, he serves as Director of Communications and Operations for Canada 2020, overseeing the organization’s communications, events, research and online initiatives.

“I get to work in that interesting grey area, that cool space between media and politics and policy and academia and business. We don’t really have a vibrant think tank culture in Canada,” Paterson said. “We are a rare bird, a spot for people who are progressively minded, to come and talk about issues that are facing Canada, not just today, but on a longer horizon.”

Most recently, he worked on events surrounding the first U.S. State Visit by a Canadian Prime Minister in almost two decades, looking to expand opportunities for Americans to engage with Canadians.

Although his work faces forward, he still values his past.

“I see elements of what I started out doing at Western every single day,” he said. “My path started at Western. I would not be doing what I am doing right now, living in that interesting area between politics and government and media, if not for the program I took there.” **WAG**