

Coronavirus: Digital Democracies

When social lives and consumer behaviour go almost completely digital, political practices are also forced to shift. This report explores how emergency governance is affecting brand priorities and marketing communications during the coronavirus pandemic

WGSN Insight Team | 05.14.20

7 minutes

WGSN

WGSN[^]
BY ASCENTIAL

Analysis

The pandemic has accelerated government transitions from big, centralised agencies to local bodies connected by digital infrastructure.

Citizens' critical information needs are being met by journalism that is produced and circulated online as everyone is instructed to shelter in place – an act of solidarity that is crucial to controlling the spread of the virus.

In an unprecedented shift, politics are going overwhelmingly digital. In April, the UK parliament hosted its first online prime minister's questions; the EU parliament moved to e-voting; the Scottish parliament held a Virtual Question Time; and New Zealand's select committees' hearings are being broadcast online. Pre-existing initiatives that enable public participation in important government discussions around lawmaking and other issues, such as vTaiwan, France's Parlement et Citoyens, and Decide Madrid, are also shifting online. Decentralising aspects of government in this way to allow more individual participation is mitigating fears of emergency measures being used as a pretext to usher in restrictions on human rights and privacy.



Gradual reopenings will bring a mix of anxiety, relief and unanswerable questions for people as we emerge from lockdown. Brands should prepare for lasting changes in how we interact with our democratic systems, as well as significant shifts in consumer behaviour. Key lasting shifts will include Boomers adopting more digital habits, following increased online shopping and usage of tech-enabled services, while Millennials will become less reliant on services, as they've been forced to be more self-sufficient during the pandemic.

These changes are more than just temporary, and will be major factors in shifting political sentiments. Reaching voters in their homes and even bringing in voting virtually is going to be increasingly important as we move towards the US election in November. California governor Gavin Newsom has announced that all registered voters in the state will be able to vote by mail.

Moreover, as consumers feel increasingly community-minded and connected to their local area throughout the pandemic, they will be looking to play a bigger role in governmental decisions going forwards.

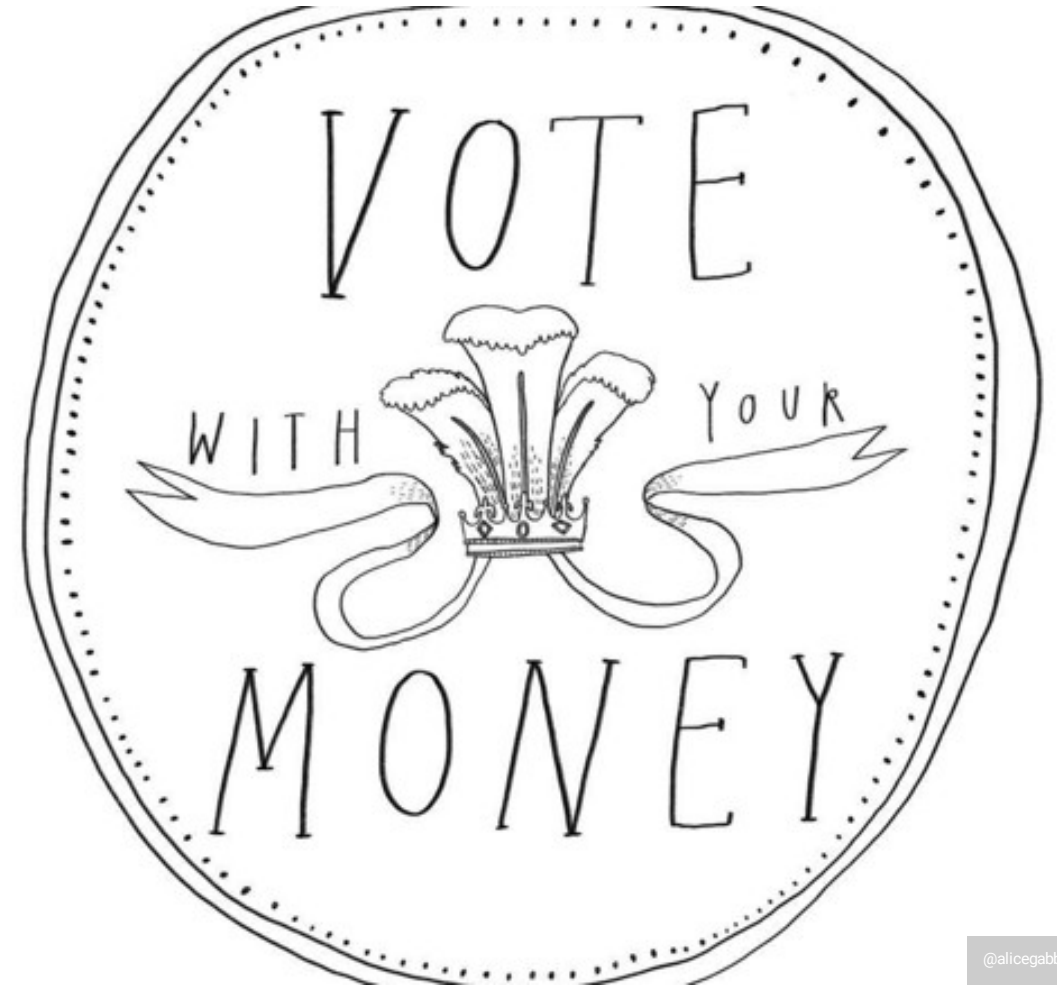


Participatory democracy

Governments and politicians are dealing with the pandemic in multiple ways. All have pivoted to make digital and social media marketing critical in distributing information and publicising the actions taken to counter the crisis.

Maintaining connections using social networks, such as Facebook or Twitter, has an increasingly civic function by facilitating human interaction and news gathering as citizens shelter in place. Social media and mobile technologies also ease the giving of one's time and effort towards political causes, while integrated financial technologies allow values-driven consumers to make small monetary donations towards causes they support. Social media platforms are likely to become increasingly political as the pandemic continues its hold on society, as well as in the wake of it, as consumers and brands alike grapple with the new normal.

WGSN has been tracking the advancement of human-to-human (H2H) commerce since 2015. Centred around evolving perceptions of value, H2H models place personalisation at the core of brand marketing strategy, as the marketing message is framed as a social movement that inspires consumer engagement. Building digital communities instead of consumer groups will strengthen the resilience of brands who are liable to be left adrift by stunted profit growth and an increasingly granular online landscape.



@alicegabb

Combatting disaffection

Throughout the pandemic, political commentary has focused on the qualities and characteristics of individual politicians rather than party manifestos. Opportunities for direct, personal contact between elected officials and their constituents have increased through digital touchpoints.

The office of New York congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez has been directly reaching out to constituents in parts of the Bronx and north-central Queens to ask if their basic needs are being met during lockdown. A tweet from New York-based writer Nicole Schuman about receiving a call from the Ocasio-Cortez office went viral on Twitter shortly after the fact. Ocasio-Cortez also joined the world of Animal Crossing: New Horizons to connect to citizens using the game. "I would like to visit random people's islands and leave a doodle or note on their bulletin board," she tweeted.

People are increasingly empowered to share their thoughts on politicians' actions, or inaction, through social media. In a seemingly more transparent political system, disaffection as a core concern among voting populations risks being accelerated.

The complicated dynamics of how people view and express emotion have shifted during the crisis. The first minister of Scotland, Nicola Sturgeon, candidly opened up on the toll the pandemic is having on her mental health, with some of her family members working on the front line. Andrew M Cuomo, the democratic governor of New York, has teared up on more than one occasion during his daily televised coronavirus briefings. He was not reluctant to admit he cried, saying it was "about the death toll".

Politicians are humanising themselves in an environment where the public is more cynical than ever about their motives and profession. Brands should equally be wary of producing content that is overly promotional, focusing on engagement first, by taking hints from political strategies that are growing
4 brands instead of bottom lines.



Activism goes digital

Activism has shifted online throughout the pandemic, with influencers and notable change-makers calling for reform virtually.

As influencers refashion themselves as social entrepreneurs in the wake of Covid-19, brand advocacy is likely to be replaced by cause advocacy. We are seeing the rise of people-driven platforms to spread information, such as Indian "mobile storytelling network", PLUC (People Like Us Create) TV, which is broadcasting user-generated content made by real-life frontline medical workers in India. This new form of broadcasting – where real-life Covid-19 doctors are acting as journalists – is changing the face of online activism and will inspire further activist consumer engagement.

In March, Gen Z change-maker Greta Thunberg called on other young climate activists to move their demonstrations online amid the pandemic, asking people to join a digital strike by posting a photo of themselves along with the hashtag #ClimateStrikeOnline. US actor and activist Jane Fonda has launched a partnership with Greenpeace to present virtual iterations of her Fire Drill Fridays, hosting monthly online rallies to continue urging the government to initiate conservational change.

We will also see increased value of activist dialogue in forming strong brand identities. By moving beyond progressive marketing campaigns and into a broader narrative of care, brands are not only proving to be resilient in the current climate but hedging to be “the change-makers in this crisis”, a phrase used by Alessandro Michele, creative director of Gucci, and Marco Bizzarri, president and CEO of Gucci. The way in which brands have used this opportunity to pivot, hitting reset on how they operate, and thinking of inventive and creative ways to give back, will be increasingly key for driving loyalty and engagement in the long-term.



Big data and mass customisation

The adoption, filtering, transformation, enhancement, and acceleration of digital democracies through networks interacts in complicated ways with democracy on the ground.

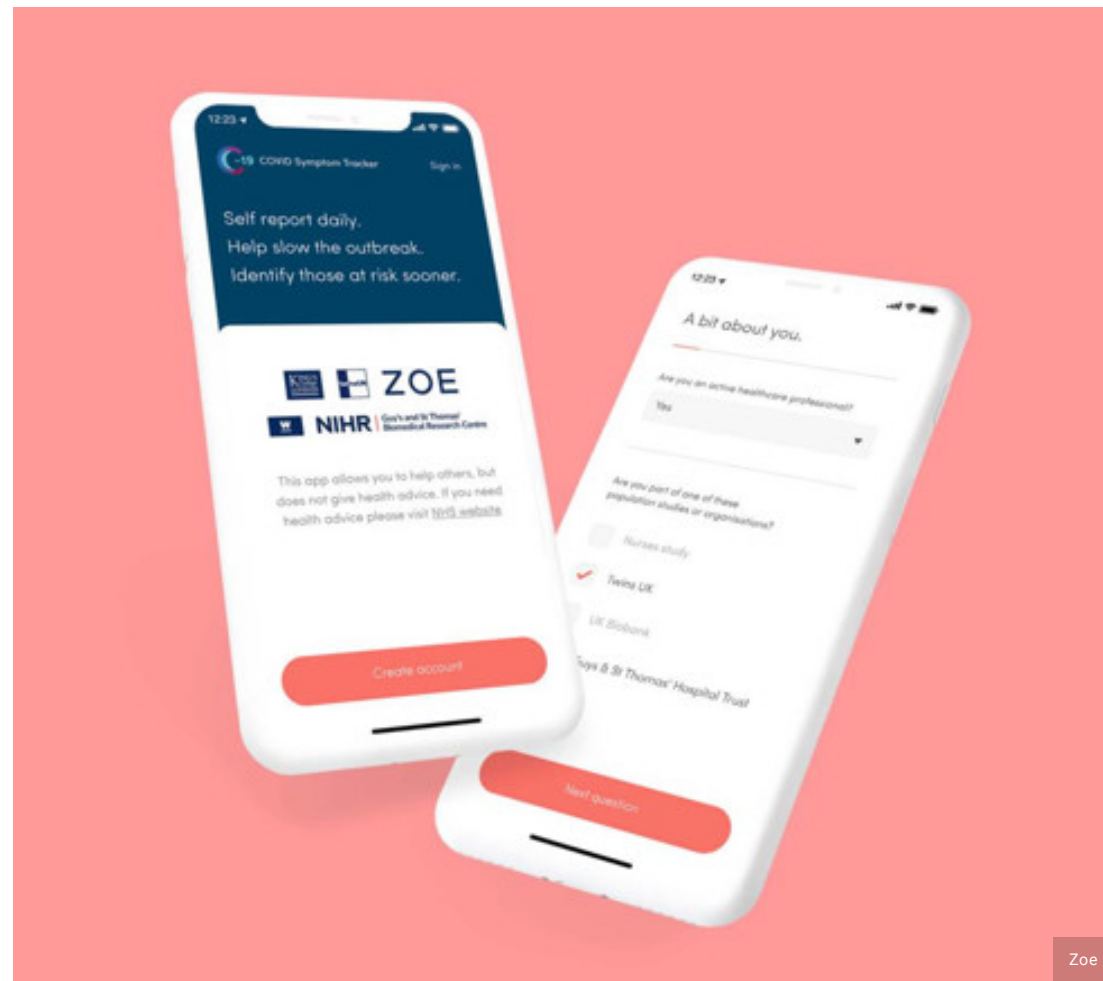
With South Korea's Covid-19 response being widely perceived as exemplary, the public may develop a greater tolerance for surveillance and big data strategies.

Data-driven personalisation may soon be used by political campaigners to attract voters. McKinsey & Company reported in 2019 that the development of more sophisticated algorithms will enable programmes to interpret and analyse emotions at scale, realising an increased involvement of voters at various levels of campaign decision-making, as strategies can be evaluated using enhanced data-gathering techniques.

In our Future Innovations 2021 report, we forecast that co-creation – bringing customers or suppliers into the creative process – will become increasingly key as an approach to problem-solving using data for innovation.

Retailers that have been using data to offer personalised products to their customers can elevate their customer base by offering customisation options. This drives advocacy to potential buyers, and initiates a feedback loop that will help companies stay one step ahead of political and electoral business cycles.

Using data, a framework of co-creation in political marketing will enable outreach to consumers with fast-moving tastes and ever-changing preferences, such as Millennials and Gen Z. Campaigns may soon be able to target voters based on their emotional state as well as their views.



Action points

1

Become increasingly customer-focused

This is imperative when public bodies are pivoting to refine their services using personal data. Transparent and collaborative approaches to mass customisation will be welcomed by consumers who are wary of giving up personal information without some kind of return

2

Advocating for change will inspire consumer engagement

Careful selection of influencer partnerships and human-to-human brand evangelism will help brands negotiate the precarious line between help and hurt amid a public sceptical about corporate #covidwashing

3

Authenticity is key

Under lockdown conditions, consumers are likely to be more concerned with being supported ideologically than shopping for nonessentials. Brands must align themselves with authenticity as digital networks increase accountability and limit the private sphere

4

Look to new engagement tools as activism goes digital

Growing communities of online activists will leave space for brands to target and engage young change-makers, meeting them where they are in a relevant and authentic way. As activism goes digital and politics shift online, it will be important to think of ways you can connect with voters in their own homes

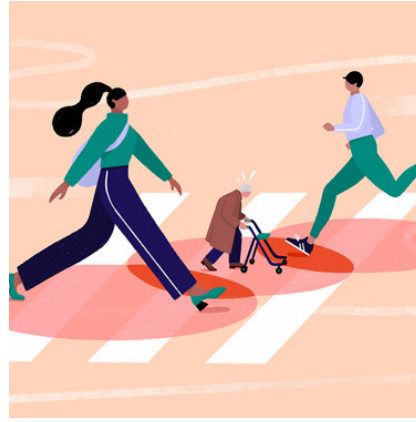
Related reports



[Coronavirus: Marketing Strategies](#)



[Coronavirus: Creative Renaissance](#)



[Coronavirus: Generational Behaviour Shifts](#)



[Coronavirus: Privacy & Trust](#)



[Coronavirus: Community Strategies](#)