Since Barack Obama won the US presidency in 2008 by harnessing the power of online platforms like Facebook, and especially Twitter, others have followed suit, says **Carl Miller**

Politicians give social media a vote of confidence

EVER since US President Barack Obama's first, thundering victory in 2008, elections have been changing. The art of winning power happens online as well as offline. By 2012, Obama's huge digital successes were impossible for other politicians to ignore.

He used his 45m Facebook likes, 23m Twitter followers and a dedicated platform to raise $690m online and to organise hundreds of thousands of offline events. Others quickly followed suit, and, in 2014, India's Narendra Modi enlisted two million volunteers via the internet, and used it to crowd-source the manifesto of his party, the BJP.

Last year's British general election also involved a burst in digital electioneering, and the research and post-mortem into what happened, and what it all means, is under way. So, as the days count down to the general election here, these are the lessons from the UK.

First, expect the emergence of Twitter as a new political battleground. The election will utilise many digital channels: Facebook will target floating voters, and good old email will squeeze money from the party faithful, but Twitter will be the most visible, and public, site of online conflict.

Political parties know that it will be a space they cannot ignore and they have been preparing for some time to fight on this new front.

Digital teams, many containing veterans of other campaigns, will spend unprecedented amounts of time and effort using the new weapons in the political arsenal: memes will be hastily knocked up to puncture the arguments of opponents and exploit their gaffes; while virals — the kind of message you just can't help sharing — will spread messages as far and as wide as possible.

Underneath all the humour and colourful imagery, largely invisible, but very serious, science will be at work, measuring, comparing, and refining the strategies in play.

This battleground won't play by the rules of conventional politics, and expect to see a ruder, rawer, more honest side of politicians than ever before.

For decades, central party hubs have enforced 'message discipline' on their politicians, carefully selecting spokespeople to talk to mainstream media and choreographing events on the campaign trail. All of this will be washed away in a river of Tweets.

Frazzled, tired, and frustrated by the campaign, politicians will, deliberately or not, let their public masks slip. Some 1,300 Tweets by politicians during the UK general election contained a swearword. The public will be even less forgiving, and will use Twitter to vent their anger at politicians, especially leaders. Some 110,000 tweets during the British campaign abused a politician — one in 50 of all tweets sent to them over that time.

Politicians will also use Twitter to depart from the party line. During the UK campaign, Labour MPs used Twitter to disagree with their own party on nuclear-weapons renewal; the Conservatives did the same for Europe.

In other cases, it will be the silence of candidates that will undermine the centrally coordinated campaigns. Of over 187,000 tweets sent by Labour candidates, only 118 mentioned one off their less popular policies — mansion tax.

Both Labour and Tory candidates learned an important tactic as the campaign progressed: avoid any mention of their leader. Just a few hundred tweets from politicians did so, out of hundreds of thousands.

Overall, incumbent politicians will struggle. From Ukip and the Scottish National Party in the UK, to the Five Star Movement in Italy, and Podemos in Spain, the largest digital swells have always clustered around the groups who have most successfully cast themselves as outsiders set on puncturing the complacency of business-as-usual politics.

Tweets do not equal votes, and, to make any of this matter, politicians will need to succeed in the difficult alchemy of turning tweets and 'likes' into the hard currencies of politics: volunteers, donations and, of course, electoral victory. For some, especially young voters, the digital world will be an important window into the campaign, and the decision that they make at the ballot box. For the majority, it will not be.

Politics remains local, even when it goes online, and Twitter will likely matter most, as it plays a part in the narrower, concrete debates about the hospitals, services, and choices that affect people's lives.

During the British election, the Conservatives' national Twitter campaign stalled badly. They received more criticism on Twitter than any other party, and their most famous figures were also Twitter's most unpopular.

However, the local picture was radically different. Their candidates in some of the closest races avoided broadcasting national slogans, and, instead, engaged in local, two-way conversations in which they listened as well as spoke. These politicians did better than any of their counterparts.

However, Twitter's most important influence on the campaign will probably not be about parties and politicians. It will be how it changes politics for the rest of us.

Professional politicians are not particularly powerful, loud or even competent voices on Twitter; actors, celebrities, sports stars, and singers are the kings and queens of social media.

Politicians will find themselves rubbing shoulders with other, often more powerful and more popular voices, some of them well-known public figures, others who have emerged on Twitter itself.

The loudest, single message on Twitter during the UK leaders' debate — itself the largest digital moment in British political history — did not come from a politician, nor a professional commentator or prominent journalist. It came from a photoshop satirist called General Boles.

Twitter will allow a new public debate to form about the future direction that Ireland should take, and it will be one that anyone can join.

Large numbers will do so, to collectively experience important events, challenge policies, throw insults, share jokes, and otherwise simply join in with this often irreverent, but certainly important, new venue for political debate.

Politics is getting ruder, faster and more exciting, and many — some for the first time — will find their own voices and jump into the crossfire.

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The Holocaust started with words, not mass killings

Today marks the 71st anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau. While the Nazis are gone, it is still necessary to fight propaganda, write **Irina Bokova** and **Sara Bloomfield**

In 1930s Germany, Nazi Party leaders understood the power of mass communication to disseminate hatred and anti-Semitism. "Propaganda," Hitler wrote, "is a truly terrible weapon in the hands of an expert."

In their rise to power, the Nazis deployed sophisticated modern communications technologies, including radio and film, to win the battle of ideas — and thus to shape public opinion and behaviour — among a well-educated population in a fledgling democracy.

The Nazis are gone but propaganda lives on, and its potential is deadlier than ever. As we commemorate the 71st anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau today, extremist groups around the globe wield new technologies to incite hatred and perpetrate new mass killings and genocides.

That's why Unesco has decided to base this year's International Day of Commemoration on the theme 'From Words to Genocide: Anti-Semitic Propaganda and the Holocaust'.

Unesco and the US Holocaust Memorial Museum are joining forces to present, at Unesco headquarters, the exhibit 'State of Deception: The Power of Nazi Propaganda'.

During the early 1930s, a period of severe economic distress, many Germans were willing to overlook the Nazis' anti-Semitism, because they were attracted to other aspects of the party's message.

The Nazis knew this: In the run-up to the 1932 election, the party relied on the emerging field of public opinion research to probe the needs, hopes, and fears of blue- and white-collar workers, the middle class, women, farmers, and youth.

Accordingly, Nazi propagandists toned down anti-Semitic rhetoric and presented the party as the only political force capable of creating jobs and putting food on German tables. Likewise, they won over newly enfranchised women voters by portraying themselves as the defender of traditional German womanhood and the family.

Hitler's extreme nationalism resonated with many audiences, including young people who wanted to restore Germany's lost territories and military might. Rabid anti-Semitism remained at the centre of the Nazi worldview.

As soon as the party came to power, in 1933, it began to implement anti-Jewish policies. The Nazis eliminated alternative sources of information, burning books and arresting journalists as they prepared to advance their goal of establishing a united "Aryan" Europe.

In today's interconnected world, individuals and non-state groups motivated by extremist ideologies can use the power of new technologies to shape attitudes and beliefs, and incite violence on a global scale.

Since 2014, IS has disseminated more than 700 propaganda videos, tailored to various audiences, in all major languages, to maximize the reach and impact of its message.

Holocaust survivors Suzi Diamond and Tomi Reichental at a Holocaust Memorial event held recently in Dublin. Today marks the 71st anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau. Picture: Tommy Clancy

Nearly 50,000 Twitter accounts are propagating these vehicles of hatred, seeking to exploit ignorance, intolerance, and divisions within societies. Young people are being targeted for recruitment. Within the territories it controls, IS persecutes and kills individuals on religious and cultural grounds, with a recent report by the US Holocaust Memorial Museum concluding that the group has committed acts of genocide against the Yazidi minority population under its control.

Another worrisome trend is the increasingly sophisticated use of hate speech directed against minorities and migrants. Violent, exclusionary, and discriminatory rhetoric has returned to Europe — the land of the Holocaust. Extreme nationalists exploit the current refugee crisis, in a context of fear and deadly terrorist attacks, to gain large numbers of supporters.

'State of Deception' shows us how propaganda can have deadly consequences. The Holocaust began with words, not mass killings. We must remember how the poison of anti-Semitism and racism, projected through mass media and entire political, cultural, and educational systems, led a continent into violence and genocide.

Today, against the new propaganda of hatred, our challenge is to harness the power of new communication technologies to empower pluralism and human dignity for all, to combat anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial.

This new war for hearts and minds can be won only if we update and upgrade the tools of education, culture, science, and communication. Unesco was created 70 years ago for this purpose, and it leads a global programme for Holocaust education and genocide prevention, working with governments and teachers to instill this history in classrooms.

Bombs and bullets alone cannot defeat political poison. We must also win the battle of ideas. Schools, museums, and the media must help young people develop critical thinking skills.

Intellectuals, artists, and public figures must highlight the danger of indifference toward groups espousing intolerance and exclusion. Political leaders should encourage social integration and mutual understanding. This is how we can pay tribute to the victims of the Holocaust — not only to lament the dead, but also to empower the living.

■ Sara Bloomfield is director of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum. Irina Bokova is director general of Unesco.