CNN’s Don Lemon: Media Bites Back!
The modern entanglement of news, tech, and politics

How contemporary campaigning is shifting to target the millennial voter.

The viral video victory of New York’s Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez: From long shot to rising star
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HUMAN & MACHINE

The Radical Stand for the Center

PATRICK LAU
Putting politics on the blockchain
and bringing science into the statehouse.

THE IDEA OF THE DISTRIBUTED
Autonomous Organization (DAO) was both revolutionary and utterly simple: a venture capital fund run on a voting model. The DAO, launched in April 2016, pooled their cryptocurrency resources and created a kitty worth over 11 million Ether. But this hedge fund for the 21st century didn’t rely on analysts or management to judge a project’s worth. Applicants with a good idea that needed some cash to get off the ground could appeal to the community at large, who would deliberate and vote on it as individuals. This was a brand new model: it was blockchain in action, and a demonstration of how this technology could create a system of distributed capitalism, overthrow our reliance on Big Finance, and give us a more equal society. But the dream lasted only a couple of weeks.

In June, an attacker exploited a vulnerability in the code underlying the DAO to drain a third of the fund: 3.6 million Ether, then worth around $50 million. The hacker used a
false identity,” says Alazraki. “There is a sense of belonging, and the psychological effect of being part of something because you choose to do so.”

Alazraki is keen on the idea that Horizon State can help to ameliorate the toxic distrust of politicians, the media, and institutions that leads to civic disengagement. “[Horizon State] started with voter apathy,” he says. “I’ve asked myself, even as an individual, ‘Why have I elected not to vote in the last 15 years?’ And I realized that the answer was simple: because I didn’t really believe that anything will change. Every four years or so we vote and nothing happens, or we get disappointed. ... We realized that it wasn’t really about the vote—the real issue was the engagement, or the lack of engagement.”

GOVERNMENTS, OTHER ORGANIZATIONS, AND the polls at large all benefit from increased and more efficient public engagement. A 2016 report by the United Kingdom think tank Demos noted that “respondents told us that they felt better informed and more likely to vote as a result of political activity on social media, including the cohorts of people typically disinterested in politics.” Demos argued that this formed a basis to “make British democracy an everyday activity, where people, as a matter of habit and routine, participate in the institutions that shape their lives and the decisions taken for the common good.”

But as the U.S. elections that year demonstrated, digital discussions make juicy targets for bad actors. Alazraki is not shy about pointing the finger at social media as a questionable model for democratic decision-making. “[Horizon State offers] a platform that allows governments to monitor policy, share it with everyone else, and receive feedback in a constructive manner,” he says. “Governments want to be inclusive. They want to have people expressing their opinions, but it’s just too difficult. What we see is that those who use their social media—the likes of Twitter and Facebook—for engagements, quickly shy away from asking the question, because they fear how badly the answer will be manipulated, distorted, or derailed.”

“People express their opinion ... when they are safe, and they feel confident that something constructive will happen as a result of that. They need to see clear evidence that something has progressed for better or worse. We’re simply enabling communities to also look after themselves. So it is not just about the opportunity to publish information. This is also the opportunity for communities to define projects that are really important for them, and to tell the world how they’re doing with these projects, to be completely transparent.”

As the DAO taught us, a blockchain is not an irrefutable claim to security. But Alazraki argues that Horizon State’s design offers more security than e-voting systems, or paper ballots. “I don’t think any technology is bulletproof. I do think that the way we’ve constructed the design adds a lot more barriers for a typical hacker to manipulate.”
For example, [a client] actually insisted that we would have two blockchains, so we record everything twice in different technologies. Even in the very unlikely scenario that someone would manage to hack into one, it would be completely irrelevant.”

And Alazraki argues that for users of Horizon State platforms, personal information can’t be compromised. “Unlike Facebook, you are not the product. We do not hold your data. We can’t sell your data, because we don’t have it. No court order will force us to give something that we simply don’t have. We go through a level of verification with a third party. … We know that you are eligible for certain actions like voting, but we don’t store your credentials or your data. Only if you choose to disclose them, and you choose on what level you wish to disclose.”

IN AUSTRALIA, THE FLEDGLING SCIENCE PARTY is aiming to remake politics directly at the ballot box.

“If we’re getting criticism from people who consider themselves on the left and the right of politics, then I guess we’ve got to be somewhere in the center,” Andrea Leong tells me. She’s typical of Science Party candidates, being (unsurprisingly) a scientist. As a researcher, she works on antibacterial surface coatings and the human microbiome. As a politician, she’s running in a by-election to represent Wentworth, a mainly suburban district east of Sydney. The position was most recently held by former Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, who resigned at the end of August.

The Science Party’s most colorful member is Meow-Ludo Meow-Meow (full name Meow-Ludo Disco Gamma Meow-Meow), who’s gathered some notoriety for removing the chip from his public transport card and implanting it into his body. Meow-Meow was acquitted of fare evasion in June 2018. “Cyborg justice has been served,” he declared.

But Leong argues that the party isn’t about media stunts or personal brands. “We try to attract attention by being bold, rather than by being outrageous,” she tells me. “So we have policies of building a new charter city in regional Australia. … People say, ‘You can’t do that.’ And we say, ‘Well, we [once did this already]—it’s called Canberra.’

“We have had a space policy since 2013. And then the Labor Party picked it up at their conference, and then the government picked it up, and now we have a space agency. So I think we were ahead of the game on that one.”

ALTHOUGH THOSE ARE ATTENTION-GRABBING policies, the party’s platform is hardly sensational: wonkish restructuring of education and tax systems, infrastructure policies based on strong modelling, well-reasoned democratic and governance reforms.

It’s broad-appeal stuff; much of the platform matches Australian popular opinion, but remains unaadopted by the major parties in thrall to swinging fringe voters. But it’s the manner of policy formulation that make up the basis of the Science Party’s appeal. You might describe it as the scientific method, although Leong waves off suggestions of being too clinical or of ivory-tower detachment.

“We don’t reject policies out of hand, just because it’s not something we’ve tried before,” she says. “We’re willing to to look at all the evidence and make decisions based on that, rather than what we think should work. Evidence-based policy without any kind of principle is aimless. Our principles inform our policy aims, and then looking at the evidence is the method that we use to determine the policy. We have a lot of discussion related to our policy up on the website, so that people can see how we got to our conclusion. And we invite people to give us feedback, and let us know if we missed any critical evidence or, indeed, any evidence to the contrary.”

While the end result is “sensible center” policies, the method is transparent, consultative, and rigorous. That’s a shockingly radical approach, and presents a thrillingly boring alternative to disenfranchised voters who are sick of the status quo but still seek a moderate political home.

The recently deposed Turnbull provided a particularly egregious demonstration of the failues and hypocrisy of Australian government. In April 2018, he committed AUD $444 million ($321 million) in funding to a charity called the Great Barrier Reef Foundation, an organization with just six full-time employees, and one with deep links to the oil, mining, and tourism sectors.

Leong takes umbrage at both the “undemocratic nature” of the grant, and the poor decision-making process behind it. “The fact that we know so little reveals that the usual processes weren’t undertaken for something so large. There was no tender process. We don’t know if there’s any metrics on that funding—what’s the foundation supposed to deliver? It’s an affront to democracy to be giving away nearly half a billion dollars of taxpayer money without any checks and balances.”

The Great Barrier Reef debacle exemplifies the differences between Turnbull’s approach and that of the Science Party’s. One seeks the lowest common denominator, the other interrogates the complexities of an issue. It’s yet to be proven that the Science Party’s approach can have broad appeal at the ballot box, but in an age of Cambridge Analytica, Russian hackers, and data-as-identity, it’s refreshing to hear a politician sincerely talk about the challenges of engagement.

“My elevator pitch is, ‘I can’t explain what I’m trying to change in an elevator pitch,’” Leong says. “And that’s part of the problem that we have with politics today: it’s about personality, and sound bites and ‘gotchas.’ These are complex issues, and we have to be willing to have a thorough conversation about them.

“I can explain to you what my policy is in 30 seconds. But I can’t explain why, other than to say that it’s been informed by the evidence.”