Digital Democracy and the New Age of Reason
by David Winston

The question is, “What is the future of democracy in the Information Age?” But before we head into the future, I think it's important to reflect upon where we've been. Four hundred and eighty-one years ago, a young priest tacked 95 theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany and created a cultural upheaval called the Reformation that sent shock waves across the Old World. His ideas, put to paper with pen and ink, divided families and brought down kings. The world would never be the same all because a single man posted a powerful idea in a public place. In Martin Luther's time, however, communicating an idea was much more difficult. In fact, nearly impossible, and so political conversations were, for the most part, the purview of the elite. Luther's ideas were powerful, but political conversation was almost entirely dependent on oral communications that only time could facilitate.

Now, let's fast forward two centuries to 1776. This time a fiery young printer wrote a pamphlet that called for revolution and freedom from an oppressive king. 100,000 copies of Common Sense were printed on a cumbersome hand press. Still a very slow way to disseminate information but light years faster than the pen and ink of Luther's time. Political conversation now reached a mass audience despite obstacles of illiteracy, geography, and government opposition. Out of that political conversation and the power of ideas, democracy was born.

Now, fast forward again... this time to the present. Today, we have the most fantastic means of communications in the history of the world literally at our fingertips, and more people are literate than ever before. Yet, we have a system of democracy where political conversation has become 10 second sound bites; where we hear media monologues instead of political dialogue; where politics has become the cult of personality instead of the power of ideas.

The end result? People are rejecting current political conversation by simply saying, "This is not an important part of my world", returning politics more and more to the elite. But I am an optimist, and I believe the era of digital communications is, in fact, the prescription for what ails our current political system. Digital technology is the best way to communicate ideas, and democracy is the best means of realizing those ideas.

Over the past fifty years, we have strayed from our democratic roots. Robert Hutchins said, "the death of democracy is not likely to be an assassination from ambush. It will be a slow extinction from apathy, indifference and undernourishment." Digital technology gives us a second chance to revive political conversation in this country and bring democracy to the world; to go beyond the Information Age to a new Age of Reason.

We began to see the change in the early nineties when we, as a culture, crossed a digital Rubicon moving beyond mere computing to what I call the Four C's of the digital world: communications, content, collaboration and community, and no area of our lives will be more impacted by this change than our political conversation.

With the advent of the Internet, digital technology changed fundamentally from
computing to communications. This transformation reached critical mass in the early nineties when it became a reliable means of communication between individuals. This gave people the ability to create better and richer content by combining the written word with voice and video. Additionally, content became data and could be searched for important bits of information. Suddenly, millions of documents were searchable instead of looking up indexes in books, or reviewing video or audio tapes. This ease in developing content was combined with a tremendous increase in speed and in a more convenient asynchronous communications paradigm that led to more effective collaboration. Finally, the ability to communicate more easily, develop better and more usable content, and the ability to more effectively collaborate led to new communities that allowed people, in a new way, to share interests and discuss them.

So how are these four elements are changing this new world.

First, in this new Age of Reason, digital communications will deliver content and meaning in a way that empowers individuals at the expense of the elite. It will be individual-based. This is related to niche marketing - where you gather all relevant information you can about a person and then deliver the message most likely to succeed. It is more than that, because in the new digital communications model, you begin to create a relationship so you know what interests the individual, the best way to address their concerns and you are instantly aware of the degree of your success. This is a model that requires you to focus your efforts beyond simply communicating an idea to creating a relationship in order to ensure that your ideas have meaning for the individual.

Second, the tempo of this new communications medium will be at a pace that is barely comprehensible today. There will be fallout. Most organizations are incapable of operating at this pace and failures will occur. Speed brings with it immense pressures as well. Whether you are CNN or network television or MSNBC or AI's "News on the Web", deadlines become irrelevant or in reality, non-existent. With the pressure to disseminate news in real time increasing dramatically, political conversation becomes constant.

Third, digital communications are also asynchronous. Both the political world and the media world will find it extremely difficult to adapt to this change. With increasing speed of communications, we will see the electorate demanding political information on their terms and in their time. Individual convenience will be an integral part of political conversation in the future.

Fourth, the American people will become increasingly more difficult to reach as information options explode. Today, we have several hundred channels of satellite television; remote controls to bounce from one information source to another; video tapes, computer games, and chat rooms as well as traditional outlets like radio and newspapers. This fracturing of the market has serious implications for those whose function in life is political conversation - namely the media and campaign professionals. We're seeing fewer and fewer people reading newspapers. In fact, according to James Adams, the CEO of United Press, the number of newspaper readers has declined by 600,000 a year for the last ten years. Moreover, younger adults are abandoning the newspaper en masse. While adult readership has gone from 81% to 64% over the past 30 years, the majority of young people 18-24 don't read a newspaper at all.

Television isn't doing much better. A Veronis Suhler survey predicts that we will
see a 20 percent decline each decade between 2000 and 2010 in the number of hours watched per person per year. Another survey, by ActivMedia Incorporated found that Internet users spend less time reading books and 70 percent said they watched less TV. Reaching people with a political message is becoming problematic and will get worse.

Fifth, in the past, even bad programs could get an audience. Now content is king and without it the audience evaporates. Message must be clear, pertinent, persuasive, and personalized, and people are demanding more and more interactivity in their communications. Political conversation must function under the same parameters.

Finally, the delivery of message - the cost of political conversation - will become much cheaper. The expense will be in creating the message and identifying the participants.

Communications, content, collaboration and community will clearly be the new arbiters of political conversation in the new Age of Reason.

Campaign politics is no different. Building a relationship with voters in a campaign is just as important as congressional constituent service. Digital communications, I believe, will radically change the way we conduct campaigns in this new Age of Reason.

As we move into a digital world, as the market fractures and people demand convenient and personally meaningful information, the mass media paradigm that has been the staple of political campaigns and the bread and butter of consultants for years will become obsolete. Certainly, for the foreseeable future, mass media will continue to be more important, but as the audience continues to fracture, the effectiveness of mass media will only decline. Eventually, even its staunchest defenders will have to admit defeat and move toward a digital campaign environment or go the way of the dinosaurs of another age.

We know that voter participation has declined steadily over the past thirty years with just over 50% of eligible voters casting a ballot in the last presidential election. We don't know all the reasons why, but what we do know is that people have tuned out the political conversation and that occurred long before the latest Washington scandal. The traditional media must accept some of the blame for this apathy and television the lion's share. In fact, Paddy Chayevsky once called television "democracy at its ugliest."

Can you imagine ABC News covering the Boston Tea Party - "This is Peter Jennings. Extremists polluted Boston Harbor today claiming to be fighting for lower taxes. Environmentalists called them tools of the landed gentry."

It's no wonder that today's political conversation means so little to most people,
and why many now seek alternative sources - digital sources - of information. That search for unfiltered or at least self-filtered news is what's got the media elite up in arms. Mainstream journalists will say they're fighting to maintain ethics and credibility in news dissemination, but they're actually fighting for their very existence. They understand that to lose control of the content and timing of news is to lose their power base.

Clearly, the demise of traditional media, if it comes, will be the result of the media's failure to acknowledge the 4 C's of the digital age. They refuse to acknowledge the value of digital communication. They fail to understand that the increasingly filtered content of their news and, in the case of television, its 10 second sound bite paradigm no longer provides what people want. They seem unable to adapt to the notion that new collaborations are necessary in the new digital community in which we seek information and ideas.

News in the digital age - the new Age of Reason - will be increasingly individual-based. If you want to watch hype, you can still watch analog media, but if you want to understand the substance of issues, there will be many locations to walk you through even the most complicated of proposals. That doesn't mean these sources are any less biased than traditional news organizations but the filter will be out front and the focus will be on content; on ideas - which in anybody's framework is a better result.

America will be better off because political discussion will be driven more by the electorate; and when the electorate is engaged, it becomes more participatory. That's good for democracy. I think all of us understand that not all ideas are equal nor is every idea a good one. Winston Churchill put it this way, "When there is a great deal of free speech, there is always a certain amount of foolish speech." The digital world doesn't prejudice ideas, it simply makes them more accessible - good and bad. But it isn't a substitute for the human mind. The individual must make the distinction between ideas of merit and madness. We didn't ban books because Mein Kampf was written. There will always be evil in the world, but censorship is never an acceptable substitute for diligence. Consequently, culture, values and education become more important in a digital democracy because the individual will be vested once again with real power - the power of ideas.

Digital technology, I believe, has the potential to radically change the world order much as Martin Luther's rough parchment and Thomas Paine's ink-stained pamphlets did in their time. I believe it can change the world for the better bringing education and enlightenment to corners of the world held too long in dark tyranny.

We've already seen the beginnings. Today, over 600,000 people in China have access to the net and that number is expected to reach 7 million in the unbelievably short span of the next three years. Can democracy long be denied a people once they have tasted freedom? I believe the answer is no. Franklin Roosevelt said that "Democracy is not a static thing." He was right. It is constantly changing; reinventing itself; expanding and retracting as the political environment wars and cools to its precepts. Digital democracy will be no different at its core, but it has an opportunity unlike any in the history of the world to bring people and ideas together. If we embrace this exciting digital world, our own democracy will be strengthened and civilization will surely embark on a new Age of Reason and a new era of individual freedom.