Refresh the World, One Pepsi at a Time

Exploring the Pepsi Refresh Project from a critical perspective

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Introduction

Can a soda really help make the world a better place? Can every sip refresh the world? These are questions that American multinational corporation, PepsiCo did not ask, but instead told. It all started with a one-of-a-kind experiment; a campaign focused entirely on interactive and social media.

The campaign named the Pepsi Refresh Project, focused to create deeper relationships with its customers by engaging with digital technology and its interconnectedness. Launched in January, the project is a year-long marketing effort that gives people the chance to develop and vote for ideas that can help better the planet. Participants can apply from grants ranging from $5,000 to $250,000 in one of six categories: health, education, neighbourhoods, arts and culture, the planet, and food and shelter (Zmuda, N., 2010). The project ideas are then promoted through the participants’ social network accounts, and voters can vote for their favourites at refresheverything.com.

‘What Pepsi is trying to accomplish is unprecedented; its philosophy rips up the traditional marketing rulebook,’ says Natalie Zmuda, a reporter for the magazine Advertising Age (Zmuda, N., 2010). And rip up the rule book it does, as Pepsi pulled millions of dollars from television advertisements this year to focus entirely on the social media campaign. So how exactly did Pepsi promote digital engagement? What is Pepsi’s purpose in developing the Refresh Project anyways? Is it solely for the purpose of bettering the world? And what image is it really projecting and how is it achieving this?

These are the questions worth analyzing on a deeper level and they can be split into three separate categories. The first being the technologies the Pepsi Refresh Project employed. For it was through the social media they utilized and their digital engagement that ultimately led to globalisation and interconnectedness. The second category is analysing the relationship of this campaign to other cultural texts, which allows the audience to associate themselves with the Pepsi product, not only physically but emotionally too. A main question that will be asked is whether or not people’s views on the Pepsi brand have changed from the campaign. Finally, the third category lies with examining the type of representations the project wants to project to society. In essence, how Pepsi tries to differ their advertisement approach to influence its consumer’s community.
A Critical Summary of “Social Network Cause and Effect”
by John R. Quain

According to the article “Social Network Cause and Effect,” by John R. Quain, Quain argues that social networks such as Facebook, Ning, and Gowalla are changing the face of public service. Quain explores the new strategies in which organisations, and even politicians are seeking to reach out to the public by using social media. Digital engagement, he argues is on the rise, especially within non-for-profit companies and organisations seeking donations, involvement, and exposure.

Like the Pepsi Refresh Project, which used social media to help make their campaign become a reality, others are taking notice and employing similar strategies. According to Quain, 'social network pages are being used to present video pitches and instructions on how to join organizations, perform one-click donations via PayPal, and support local write-in campaigns’ (Quain, 2010, p. 36). Politicians in particular are actively engaging with sites such as Facebook to gain support for their campaigns. Smart idea? Quain argues that it is. With over 500 million users on Facebook alone, it is easy to reach mass audiences in a quick and efficient way.

To give evidence of this new digital engagement, Quain explores its use among politicians, non-for-profit volunteers, and everyday people wishing to make a difference in their local communities. First, he gives the example of American politicians, such as Sarah Palin and well-known Republican Scott Brown who use social networking sites to raise awareness and gain support for their causes. Brown used Ning, which is an online platform for users to create their own social networks, to gain supporters for his campaign. Once he had enough supporters, which he called his “Brown Brigade,” he used them to attract other voters to his network. Apart from the political side of using social media to interconnect a group of followers, Quain also gives examples where people such as Deron Beal used this new digital technology to attract people for a certain cause.

In 2003, Beal developed a network called Freecycle, which he used to reach people who were willing to give away old appliances they did not want to people who could use them, instead of placing them in landfills. His network connected people on a global scale and now has over 7.5 million members in 110 countries.

Similarly, Molly Mattessich, who is the manager for online initiatives for the Peace Corps, has seen her social network give rise to new members, and in turn new possibilities, such as online video discussions among Peace Corps volunteers. ‘The connection to the outside world can provide emotional and financial support like never before,’ says Mattessich (Quain, 2010, p.38).

Although Quain gives many examples of the use of social media by politicians, volunteers, and non-for-profit organisations and argues that this gives rise to interconnectivity than ever before, he lacks in
his engagement with competing views. In a brief paragraph, Quain addresses the arguments against social media mobility, in which he summarizes the main opposition into two points. One point being that a campaign cannot be started through a Facebook page alone. Active participation is essential in starting any movement or project, as shown through the Pepsi Refresh Project. Quain states that the second point arguer’s claim is that even with new digital technology, public service campaigns require time and effort, and therefore technology only makes these campaigns possible, not a reality. Because ultimately, many movements require extensive work and may take years to put into place. In context, Quain could have elaborated more on competing views by engaging more academically with another theorist’s arguments such as Judith Kleinfeld, author of “Could it be a Big World,” who argues against Stanley Milgram’s “small world study” and claims the world is not as interconnected as it may seem.

Overall, Quain gives solid evidence of his argument that social media is changing the face of public service. It is clear that by looking at the Pepsi Refresh Project and the technologies it employed, this has more truth than not. For it is through the Pepsi Refresh Project, that Pepsi is shifting its marketing to a more social media-oriented and interactive context, and it will be interesting to see who follows in Pepsi’s footsteps. ‘Refresh the world, one Pepsi at a time.’ Only time will tell if Pepsi is able to refresh anything at all.
Exploring the Pepsi Refresh Project: Employing Digital Technology and giving new light to the terms Globalisation and Interconnectedness

Three months ago, Forbes Magazine ranked it number 5 for top 20 best-ever social media campaigns. Not bad for Pepsi's first-ever global effort at putting their brand at the forefront of digital media. And at the forefront it went, as more people voted for Pepsi Refresh project ideas than the last United States presidential election, (according to the global director of digital and social media at PepsiCo.) And for the first time in 23 years, Pepsi did not place an ad in the Super Bowl. They chose, instead to save their money on their new, big experiment: The Pepsi Refresh Project.

The Pepsi Refresh Project is not only an innovative strategy for brand marketing, but it is also groundbreaking in regards to the technology it employs and the effect of this digital engagement. Almost one year ago, Pepsi started the Pepsi Refresh Project as a new marketing strategy that sought to place interactive and social media on a whole new level. Its goal: To forge deeper relationships with its customers in hopes of ultimately increasing sales, as any company hopes to do (Zmuda). As of September, Pepsi announced it would expand the project globally to Europe, Asia, and Latin America as consumer interest in the project continues to rise. According to Advertising Age, one million Facebook users became fans of the project, and 45 million people have cast votes for project ideas (Garcia, 2010). So what was Pepsi's strategy in deepening its relationship with its customers? The answer lies within the digital technology Pepsi employed and the interconnectivity it created.

Voting by going to a website, promoting project ideas through social networking sites, uploading videos to Facebook to gain exposure, and creating clips on the web to market their efforts are all strategies the Pepsi Refresh Project employed. These digital strategies represent a dramatic marketing shift to interactive and social media. And by engaging with social media and other online technology, a sense of 'borderless' communication was created (flew, 2008). The speed, intensity, and interconnectedness that make up this new media technology and employ this 'borderless' communication ultimately gives rise to globalisation.

Authors of New Media: A Critical Introduction, argue that new media exposes a shift from modernity to postmodernity and carries an ideological sense that new media is synonymous with such phrases as 'the cutting edge' and 'avant garde.' Finally, new media intensifies the process of globalisation by 'dissolving national states and boundaries in terms of trade, corporate organisation, customs and cultures, and identities and beliefs (Lister, M. et al., 2003, p. 10). However, it is possible that the most important factor new media creates is the potential for interactivity.
'At the ideological level, interactivity is understood as one of the key value added characteristics of new media. Where old media offers passive consumption new media offers interactivity' (Lister; M. et al., 2003, p. 20). Ultimately, new media intensifies user engagement; providing greater choice and freedom over the web. The viewer now becomes the user, and its opportunities are seemingly endless. From reading to changing, to synthesizing text, video, and other visual culture, users are able to connect to digital media in ways that were not possible before (Lister; M. et al., 2003, pp. 19-22). This interactivity created by new media 'offers unprecedented opportunities for making connections between individuals, within organisations, and between individuals and organisations' (Lister; M. et al., 2003, p. 22). The Pepsi Refresh Project saw a chance to engage with this interactivity and connect to their consumers, and so they utilized social networks as a starting point to kick start this interactivity.

Social networks are just one medium housing large amounts of interactivity. Politicians, non-profit volunteers, and other organisations have seen the potential of social networks and have tapped into the advantages they create (Quain, J. R., 2010). As Quain, author of Social Network Cause and Effect, argues that because of the interactivity social networks create, exposure and interconnectivity are inevitable (Quain, J. R., 2010). Pepsi saw this as a way to expose the Pepsi Refresh Project and ultimately establish new relationships with their consumers as never before seen (Zmuda, N., 2010).

In order to vote for an idea seeking a grant under the Pepsi Refresh Project, people had to go online and access the refresh everything web page. On the webpage was also a blog for participants to write about their project ideas. However, to gain votes, participants had to do more than just use the Pepsi Refresh blog they also had to promote their ideas. And what better way to promote an idea, than over a social networking site, particularly Facebook. Millions of people uploaded video clips of their ideas over their Facebook accounts, and in turn, millions of people watched these clips, ultimately exposing a project idea, but ultimately exposing Pepsi (Zmuda, N., 2010).

Pepsi's new social media marketing efforts marks a one-third shift in its budget from television and print campaigns to interactive and social media (Zmuda, N., 2010). With this shift come some new changes at PepsiCo headquarters. Global director of digital and social media at PepsiCo Bonin Bough reports that the company now has digital and social media-focused programs held once a month to educate creative workers on new strategies and practices. The company also has explored new ways that executives can utilize new digital technology internally. One development has been a digital compass called the wiki that allows executives to view and share comments and analyze case studies within the company (Zmuda, N., 2010). PepsiCo has also hired new digital agencies such as Huge, Firstborn, and VML to expand on its new media marketing effort. 'We expect digital thinking to be a part of all the agencies we work with,' Mr. Bough said (Zmuda, N., 2010). Perhaps, new digital thinking is an inevitable part of today's world. Media theorist Marshall McLuhan would seem to think so.

McLuhan's claim that technology revolutionizes society and that it is not the content of media technologies, rather the technologies themselves that matter can be seen in the rise of digital engagement among individuals and organisations (Laughey, D., 2007). McLuhan argued that media has powerful
effects on society and that media ultimately becomes extensions of ourselves (Laughey, D., 2007). Social networking sites are a clear example of how media has evolved, shaped, and inevitably altered the way people engage with media. Without social media, the Pepsi Refresh Project would not have been possible. Participants would not have been able to promote their ideas. The project would have failed to connect people on the global scale that it was able to do. Voters would not have been able to engage with video clips and information, and Pepsi’s name would have been seen far less frequently over the web. Although it is unclear whether the Pepsi Refresh Project refreshed the world or its brand, it is clear that it certainly refreshed the way companies view interactive and social media.
Bibliography


