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The tipping point: A case study of the Bernie Sanders Movement and hashtag activism in the postmodern public relations perspective

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I. Introduction

The concept of the public sphere has been deemed the secret to the advancement and maintenance of democracy. Metaphorically placed between the state and society, the sphere acts as the "space" for citizens to hold open dialogue about current issues. Topics addressed within the sphere, which survive critique and analysis, will morph from mere ideas into accepted policy changes. Competing rhetoric within the public sphere is the basis for democracy – different perspectives are discussed before the government creates legislation (Sommerfeldt, 2013, p. 281).

Public relations serves a vital role within the context of the public sphere, as its tactics are utilized to promote certain messages and garner more attention to certain ideas in order to drive policy changes. By fueling societal dialogue and creating community amongst diverse publics, public relations can serve an advocacy function in the public sphere (Sommerfeldt, 2013, p. 281).

The research presented in this case study investigates the public relations tactics used by the Bernie Sanders Movement – the millions of volunteers across the United States that dedicated time to the Sanders presidential campaign. Through digital grassroots efforts, the Bernie Sanders Movement, particularly the millennial generation, facilitated societal dialogue and overcame the negative stigma of what has been deemed "hashtag activism."

Using the postmodern public relations theory as theoretical framework, the research methodology used is the descriptive case study approach. the Bernie Sanders Movement is analyzed through news articles, social media statistics, studies of campaign applications, press releases and polls.

II. Postmodern public relations theory & public relations activism

In a traditional sense, public relations has been viewed as simply a communications function - practitioners within an organization must act as the messengers, publicity coordinators and media relation specialists (Grunig, 2009, p. 4). More specifically, the main role of public relations professionals is to assist the dominant coalition within society by utilizing communication management tactics and acting as strategic aids to the leaders of various organizations (Grunig, 2009, p. 2). The long-established, modernist view of public relations, therefore, only views the field as a mirror to reflect the interests of the societal elite.

The emergence of the postmodern theory has "offered a new critical approach to public relations theory and practice and suggests that public relations should be freed from its narrow definition as organizational communication management" (Holtzhausen, 2000, p. 95). The postmodern perspective of public relations is a relatively new concept, as many researchers in the past have taken resistance against the theory (Holtzhausen, 2000, p. 95). Holtzhausen (2000) argues that, like many other areas in the social sciences, the postmodern perspective will allow public relations professionals to better understand the diverse society and understand the public relations discipline in a deeper sense.

Postmodern theory began mid-twentieth century as a reaction to the technology boom within the Western world that ended the modern, or humanist, era. The theory has often been described as ambiguous, as scholars have debated the true definition of postmodernism and how it can serve current society's understanding of the world (Best & Kellner, 1991). Postmodern theory is used to describe the cultural and societal changes that occurred during the twentieth century and to explain phenomena within a variety of disciplines (Best &

Kellner, 1991).

A key theorist involved in the postmodern theory movement, Jean-Francois Lyotard, describes postmodern theory as an analysis of knowledge. The onset of technology has called into question the grand narratives or metanarratives within society, challenging society's widely accepted ideologies that dominate culture in the Western world. As Lyotard (1979) explains within the postmodern context, knowledge is ideologically grounded, should be treated as a journey rather than a destination, and is a matter of perspective. Knowledge should no longer be treated as a social construction but can change depending on the individual receiving the information (Lyotard, 1979). Therefore, more emphasis is placed on the influence of history, culture, society, class and gender on the individual (Holtzhausen, 2000, p. 95).

Postmodern theory, therefore, can be applied to the field of public relations – hence, postmodern public relations theory. Postmodernism believes that varying perspectives and ideas will best serve the continuation of civilization, and, in particular, democracy. In this way, postmodernism promotes an ethically responsible society. Some examples of this would be technology serving humanity rather controlling it, citizens striving to protect the environment, and democracy truly serving the interests of the people. As Holtzhausen explains, an "ethically responsible society supports science and technology but also emphasizes imagination, sensitivity, emotion, humanity and an appreciation of differences" (Holtzhausen, 2000, p. 96). Public relations in the postmodern perspective refutes the claim that the discipline is subservient to the interests of the elite and should not be regarded as simply a management function. Instead, public relations plays a larger role in an ethical, idea-driven society.

Public relations activism is perhaps one of the most powerful examples of public relations as an extension of postmodern theory. According to Benecke and

Oksiutycz (2006), public relations activism opposes the metanarrative within society that limits public relations to a tool for the corporate and governmental elite. Instead, public relations activism can be used to evoke fundamental change within society and contribute to dialogue within the public sphere (Sommerfeldt, 2013, p. 281).

In the paradigm of postmodernism, public relations activism serves an ethical role in society by introducing new ideologies and utilizing public relations tactics to affect public policy. Instead of accepting the metanarratives, public relations tactics can promote new perspectives against dominant ideologies that may marginalize and oppress groups of people within an organization or civilization (Holtzhausen, 2000, p. 105). As Calhoun (1993) explains, public relations has become vital for the continuation of democracy, as it enables "publics' participation in public spheres of debate - empowering publics to affect the conditions of their existence through effecting a critical publicity" (as cited in Sommerfeldt, 2013, p. 281).

III. The evolution of hashtag activism to legitimate advocacy

As social media has allowed society to connect on a global scale, the onset of a new form of advocacy has arisen due to new technologies. Deemed "hashtag activism," a term coined during the Occupy Wall Street movement, this new form of advocacy steps away from the traditional, boots-on-the-ground approach to combatting social and political issues. Instead of holding rallies and knocking door-to-door as the sole means to begin a movement, activists raise awareness through online digital movements, usually led by a coined phrase in the form of a hashtag (Anschuetz, 2015).

Those in favor of hashtag activism believe that social media is an ideal platform to raise awareness of a broad spectrum of issues. However, many critics are skeptical of movements that begin on social media because these critics do not believe such advocacy will produce tangible results needed to cause real change within society. Instead, the movements will begin to pick up steam and become trendy for a short period of time, only to be pushed aside for the next online digital movement. As Eric Augenbraun (2011) wrote in *The Guardian*, many believe that hashtag activism should not be taken as a serious form of advocacy. While social media can be extremely useful in building upon one's social capital, "they do not represent alternatives to the exhausting, age-old work of meeting people where they are, hearing their concerns, reaching common ground, building trust and convincing them that it is in their interests to act politically to change their circumstances" (Augenbraun, 2011).

Critics of hashtag activism usually list #Kony2012 or #BringBackOurGirls as failed social media campaigns, as these movements raised awareness but failed to produce tangible results (Anschuetz, 2015). However, it is important to note that several campaigns that began by a simple hashtag did make progress beyond simply raising awareness - the #ALSIceBucketChallenge raised over 100 million dollars for ALS research in 2014, and the Black Lives Matter movement, which began online in 2014 by three women after several African American males were shot by police. The Black Lives Matter movement has garnered the attention of not only the general public, but also by celebrities, students, and even President Barack Obama. Progressive politicians have increased their focus on combatting racial injustices within the United States as a result of the movement (Anschuetz, 2015).

Therefore, the major question is, what makes a digital campaign successful? Why do some campaigns thrive and produce tangible results, while

some only simply raise awareness and fade before real change occurs? According to a 2012 study by the University of Washington, digital activism is most successful when social media tactics are combined with boots-on-the-ground organization.

The Digital Activism Project, led by Professor Philip Howard of the University of Washington, examined 2,000 cases over the last 20 years, with heavy emphasis placed during 2010 to 2012 (Kelley, 2013). Major findings during the study included the following:

1. Digital campaigns are more successful when movements are waged against the government, rather than corporations.

2. Digital activism that employs a variety of social media tools, rather than just one social media network, is usually more effective.

3. Successful digital activism is non-violent in nature and does not promote acts of violence or cyber terrorism.

According to Professor Howard, these three factors together "are the magic ingredients, especially when the target is a government — a real recipe for success" (Kelly, 2013).

In addition to the three ingredients found in the University of Washington study, Jen Schradie, a sociologist with the Institute for Advanced Study in Toulouse, France, found other commonalities among successful web-based movements in her studies of digital activism (Vara, 2015). The campaign needs promotion from a "high-profile" person within society, such as a celebrity or well-known politician, a sense that the campaign is arising at a pivotal point in history, as well as "a strong relationship between the online activism and offline organizing, often including ties with established groups" (Vara, 2015). In other words, a sense of community needs to be built amongst the activists for true social

change to occur.

Among the web-based activists, the millennial generation is at the forefront of this upcoming digital advocacy machine. The millennial generation is composed of individuals born between 1981 to 1997, and, as of 2015, the generation has surpassed the Baby Boomer generation and become the largest living generation with 75.4 million millennials (Fry, 2016). According to a report released by the Pew Research Center, millennials are more racially and ethnically diverse than any previous generation. Millennials are less likely to be religious or be in the military and more likely to be progressive in political ideologies. This generation is also on track to be the most educated in history, as a college education is now deemed necessary to obtain an entry-level job (Pew Research Center, 2010, p. 1).

The millennial generation is also known for its digital expertise. As millennials have grown up surrounded by technology, , "they treat their multi-tasking hand-held gadgets almost like a body part – for better and worse" (Pew Research Center, 2010, p. 1). Eighty percent of millennials report sleeping next to their cell phone, 75% have a social media profile, and a majority of millennials (54%) believes digital technology brings society closer together. Knowing that millennials are so comfortable in the digital realm, it is clear why digital activism is a tactic used by this generation (Pew Research Center, 2010, p. 25,).

The millennial generation views digital activism as a journey toward social change. Instead of organizing movements in person, millennials can organize rallies, raise awareness of issues, and help fundraise from the comfort of their own homes (Faw, 2012). Therefore, it is the exploration of public relations advocacy through digital means that is a conceptual approach to public relations in the postmodern perspective. The rise of hashtag activism rejects the metanarrative proclaiming that digital activism cannot create change - but hashtag

activism, with the right combination of tools, can become a powerful advocacy machine.

IV. The Bernie Sanders Movement: A case study

On April 30, 2015, Senator Bernard (Bernie) Sanders of Vermont announced his candidacy to become the president of the United States of America. Sanders, the longest-serving Independent in congressional history, decided to take on the powerful political machine, Hillary Rodham Clinton, in the Democratic primary race. Outside of the U.S. Capitol, Sanders pitched his political platform, which focused on America's dwindling middle-class, to merely a handful of reporters in a small press conference. What was thought to be a dark horse, low-profile campaign became one of the most successful grassroots efforts in recent history (Merica, 2015).

Before publicly announcing his candidacy, Sanders and his campaign staff sent an email to his close supporters on the morning of April 30, 2015, highlighting middle class struggles as the main focus of his presidential campaign. In an interview with the Associated Press, Sanders warned that he should not be underestimated, as he has "run outside of the two-party system, defeating Democrats and Republicans" and "[taken] on big-money candidates" for years (Merica, 2015).

Within the first 24 hours that Sanders announced his candidacy for president, a mass movement began to form, as many people believed Sanders offered a more progressive platform than Clinton. More than 100,000 people signed up on Sanders' website to begin volunteering for his campaign, and over $1.5 million in individual contributions was raised after the campaign's

declaration email (Bernie 2016, 2015). Because Sanders refused to take any campaign donations from super PACs due to his distaste for big money in politics, a major grassroots movement became the driving force of his campaign.

The millions of volunteers within the Bernie Sanders Movement became proponents of digital activism, utilizing public relations tactics in the paradigm of the postmodern theory. Through social media and online applications devised by grassroots activists primarily within the millennial generation, the Bernie Sanders Movement became the tipping point for hashtag activism, evolving from armchair, meaningless support to legitimate advocacy.

V. Research methodology

A descriptive case study approach was used for this study, which allows the researcher to examine an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon within a real-life scenario (Baxter and Jack, 2008, p. 548). Within this particular case study, the public relations tactics used by the Bernie Sanders Movement are presented.

The focus of this study was to identify common themes within the Bernie Sanders Movement that caused the heavily disputed idea of hashtag activism to become a legitimate form of advocacy, thus supporting and contributing to Professor Howard's research within the Digital Activism Project. Through community building and societal awareness, the Bernie Sanders Movement was a prime example of public relations in the postmodern perspective: public relations tactics contributed to dialogue within the public sphere and rejected the metanarratives within society (Sommerfeldt, 2013, p. 281).

Over a span of approximately 50 hours solely dedicated to the research project, data was first collected using Academic Search Complete and Google Scholar to better understand the concepts of digital activism and postmodern theory. After forming the initial base of knowledge, a timeline of the Senator Sanders presidential campaign was created and analyzed by using online news content. This timeline was vital to the research as it revealed when volunteers became actively engaged within the political process and formed the Bernie Sanders Movement.

The timeline also exposed recurring patterns that formed the basis of the next stage of the research process. Using key search phrases such as "Bernie Sanders grassroots strategies," "coding strategies Bernie Sanders," and "digital activism Sanders movement," strategic searches on Google were made to better understand the grassroots tactical efforts, ranging from millennials' use of technology to the coding techniques used by volunteers within the movement. These findings were compiled into a database on the researcher's personal computer based on search criteria.

Using methodical Google searches, the most reliable sources of data to analyze the Bernie Sanders Movement were news articles, published interviews of those involved in the Bernie Sanders Movement, analyses of digital applications, and polling. All content involved in the case study was dated during the course of Sanders' presidential campaign: April 2015 to July 2016.

VI. Findings

The Bernie Sanders Movement aimed to develop active citizenship within the United States. Through digital grassroots efforts, the network of volunteers promoted active citizenship within the country by creating a sense of community

amongst Sanders supporters. This overarching focus on the Bernie Sanders Movement will be discussed in greater detail using the collections of data discovered through research.

The sense of community became evident when the movement's iconic hashtag surfaced on Twitter and grew viral across social media platforms. Developed by digital strategist and Bernie volunteer, Winnie Wong, #FeelTheBern became the most popular hashtag during the Democratic primary campaign. According to the social media tracking tool Topsy, #FeelTheBern was tweeted on average 6,800 times per day, compared to Hillary Clinton's hashtag, #ImWithHer, at 2,700 times per day (Levitz, 2015).

In 2016, Paste Magazine aptly described the beginning of the Bernie Sanders Movement with the idea that a "hashtag became a crusade." The hashtag became a unifying force for the movement, appearing across social media platforms, morphing Reddit and Tumblr into Bernie-dominated discussion boards, developing into clothing lines on Etsy, and even sparking Bernie Sanders tattoos. Through the ease of searching #FeelTheBern, supporters could view fellow Bernie-supporters through the search of a simple hashtag. The movement began to grow across the digital realm (Lazzaro, 2016).

Deemed BernieBros and SanderSistas, millennials began to invest in the Bernie Sanders Movement by utilizing online tools and developing digital applications. These applications aimed to draw supporters together despite geographic distances, creating communities based around the Bernie Sanders ideology. The traditional boots-on-the-ground activist approach was rejected; instead, the volunteers' digital tools helped organize the Bernie Sanders rallies and orchestrated voter outreach.

One of the main digital grassroots headquarters could be found on Reddit, where over 180,000 subscribers coordinated rallies and developed strategies on

the message board. Using the subreddit (Reddit entries organized by areas of interest) "r/SandersforPresident," online visitors began to form friendships based on the common ideology-support and motivate one another to avoid "slacktivism," a phrase coined to describe online volunteers that only post support and do not engage in campaign initiatives (Iowa Starting Line, 2016). The powerful digital grassroots tool "face-banking," developed from the subreddit, further expanding the Bernie Sanders Movement community across the country.

Face-banking became possible when Reddit users discovered that volunteers could manually find friends on Facebook that "liked" Bernie Sanders support pages. Activists with coding experience made the process even easier by inventing the "Bernie Friend Finder," a small search bar that can be opened when users are logged into Facebook. The tool would then show the user every friend and friend-of-friend in a certain state that "likes" a Bernie Sanders support page. Therefore, the volunteers in the Bernie Sanders Movement could not only easily find one another through the digital tool but also send fellow supporters voting reminders and digital invites to local Sanders volunteer events (Rynard, 2016).

The sense of community within the Bernie Sanders Movement strengthened when the dialogue between volunteers became more casual in nature. Zach Fang, a lead field organizer within the movement, convinced the Sanders' campaign that telephone calls were an "outdated tool for voter contact" and suggested the idea of texting fellow supporters instead (Issenberg, 2016). Hustle, a simple app created in 2008, streamlined the mass text messaging process. Developed by a San Francisco startup, the app allows campaign volunteers to track thousands of centralized text messages from the comfort of their own homes. Previous campaigns had tried to utilize the app through formalized messages with donation requests or a call-to-action to vote. If message recipients tried to initiate conversation, automatic replies would be delivered,

preventing possible relationships from forming within the campaign.

The Bernie Sanders Movement, however, took a different approach with the Hustle app. Fang encouraged volunteers to initiate conversation with fellow supporters by asking questions, fueling excitement, and prompting them to become actively involved in the campaign. In an interview with Bloomberg Politics, Fang reiterated that the secret to digital grassroots efforts is not "blasting things out," but "building relationships with people." The movement realized the potential of Hustle when 235 volunteers were secured for an Oklahoma event in the first 16 hours of using the app, when it had taken 60 Sanders staffers 2220 hours to secure 465 commitments for a previous event (Issenberg, 2016).

Young, tech-friendly voters helped the digital community continue to grow through the creation of mobile applications. The 2016 presidential campaign had been dubbed the "year of the app" by Politico, as over 1,000 volunteer coders created an average of one new app per week during the Democratic primary season to aid the Sanders campaign (Samuelsohn, 2016). In order to help volunteers locate and manage the multitude of apps available, a Reddit group named "CallforSanders Team," developed Bernie's Volunteer Toolkit (www.bernkit.com), or the Bern Kit, in early 2016.

The Bern Kit could be compared to an online headquarters for the Bernie Sanders Movement, housing over 50 applications created by fellow volunteers. Featured applications included informational apps about Senator Sanders' presidential platforms, apps that aided in activist efforts, voting information apps, online phonebanking tools, and communication apps.

The most heavily used applications located on the Bern Kit were online tools that helped those within the Bernie Sanders Movement connect with one another in person. An app dubbed "Ground Control," for example, helped volunteers organize grassroots events. Another popular mobile tool, Bernie BNB,

allowed over 1,000 volunteers to connect with one another to find free housing while attending Bernie Sanders rallies or be able to attend volunteer events outside hometowns (Samuelsohn, 2016). Other applications that helped facilitate face-to-face interaction between volunteers on the Bern Kit included Bernie Sanders Events and Go The Distance.

The Bernie Sanders Movement's digital activist tactics were not just strategic; many applications were interactive and entertaining for users, strengthening the community of its members. Field the Bern, for instance, was one of the more popular apps found on the Bern Kit. The mobile canvassing application was built like a game: Bernie supporters would have access to an interactive map of local neighborhoods to see which houses have been visited. Once a supporter had talked to the homeowner about Senator Sanders, the volunteer could record the interaction to earn points and compete with friends. Available for free online, the app received a 4.5-star rating on Apple's App Store and a 5-star rating on Google Play, with reviewers complimenting the app's fluid design and how easy it was to begin volunteering for Bernie.

Some applications were strictly created for entertainment purposes and to strengthen the culture within the movement. Like the proverbial concert t-shirt, Senator Sanders' iconic wispy white hair and glasses became the overarching themes for several applications. The Bernie Photo Booth was an online tool that replaced supporters' faces in Facebook profile pictures with Senator Sanders' face. Supporters could also help Senator Sanders "race to the White House" with the popular iTunes application, Bernie Sandwiches, in which users helped a cartoon-like Sanders collect sandwiches on the way to the White House (Bauerlein & Macmillan, 2016). Bernie Sandwiches was featured on MSNBC's *All In With Chris Hayes* and has been downloaded over 100,000 times as of April 2016.

Though some apps were originally created for entertainment purposes, the Movement found ways to transform the apps into relationship-building tools for the campaign. For instance, a dating site, Bernie Singles, helped millennials connect with one another over mutual ideology. Created in February 2016 by Arizona State University student Colten Caudle, Bernie Singles mimicked typical dating sites by connecting users in local geographic areas. Within a few hours of its launch, the site went viral with its thousands of registrations, prompting Caudle to hire several web developers to manage the site 24/7 (Pangburn, 2016).

Although the app intended to help facilitate romantic relationships, Sanders supporters used the app to create connections and strengthen the community of the Bernie Sanders Movement. In an interview with The Daily Good in 2016, University of Wisconsin-Madison student Maggie Calkins used the application for a strategic purpose, stating: "I basically joined to get more ideas on how to help Bernie and to also tell more people who support him to contact their state's superdelegates." She further explains that "a few people have actually messaged [her] asking how to contact the superdelegates in their respective states." Other supporters stated they joined the Bernie Singles page simply to become involved in the Bernie Sanders Movement community (Pangburn, 2016).

VII. Discussion

When examining the tactics utilized by the Bernie Sanders Movement, one may wonder how such strategies provided a tipping point for hashtag activism to become a legitimate form of advocacy within society. Instead of previous digital campaigns that did not produce tangible results, such as the aforementioned #Kony2012 or #BringBackOurGirls, the Bernie Sanders Movement created

change within society by pushing the Democratic National Committee to the left on the political spectrum and engaging first-time voters. Creating a sense of community became the driving force of the movement; cultivating relationships amongst individuals to create networks that contribute to the public sphere is integral to the continuation and success of democracy (Sommerfeldt, 2012, p. 280).

The Bernie Sanders Movement also serves as a paradigm of postmodern public relations. As Holtzhausen (2000) explains, public relations in the activist function can bring about fundamental change within society, which is "both desirable and ethical." In order to reinvent democracy, individuals must form communities to drive new media and technologies that reject the metanarratives within society (Holtzhausen, 2000, p. 100).

By creating a network of individuals based on the ideology presented by Senator Sanders, the Bernie Sanders Movement rejected the modernist notion that digital activism cannot serve a legitimate advocacy function within society. Instead, the Movement ignored the claims that hashtag activism should be considered "slacktivism," or merely armchair support. As in a postmodern perspective, the movement utilized technology to "not dominate humanity, but to serve it" (Holzhausen, 2000, p. 96). Through digital platforms , a myriad of new, progressive ideas were presented within the public sphere, cultivating an ethically responsible society.

The idea of hashtag activism within society has been highly disputed over its legitimacy. While many movements have attempted to use digital tools to raise awareness of issues or fundraise, finding the right recipe for a successful campaign has been out of reach. One may wonder if online public relations tools truly have the potential for true advocacy. As evidenced by the Bernie Sanders Movement, however, the secret to successful hashtag activism is not utilizing

digital tools strictly for spreading a message. The focus of digital activism should instead be on fostering relationships amongst members of society, as organized alliances amongst individuals are the true change-makers within the public sphere. Past campaigns that have utilized digital tools could contribute their failures to the lack of an organized community (Sommerfeldt, 2013, p. 282). The Bernie Sanders Movement, therefore, can be seen as the tipping point for hashtag activism within society. The future of digital activism can be found within the community-building strategies implemented by the movement.

Within the postmodern perspective, public relations serves an integral role in "nation building and democratization" within civil society (Sommerfeldt, 2013, p. 281). As Sommerfeldt (2013) explains, civil society can be metaphorically compared to the space between the private and public spheres within society; it exists outside of the government, but directly affects the government's focus. Civil society contains religious, social, and cultural organizations that attempt to contribute their ideas within the public sphere. Civil society's main purpose, therefore, is to "affect public policy and the government" (Sommerfeldt, 2013, p. 282).

The Bernie Sanders Movement acted as a key organization within civil society, raising awareness of political issues through the reiteration of Senator Sanders' presidential platform. By engaging many first-time voters, many of which belonging to the millennial generation, the United States government was introduced to many issues that were once overlooked within the country, namely the struggling middle-class, wealth inequality, healthcare, and overturning Citizens United.

VIII. Limitations and future research

As this paper is a meta-analysis of a phenomenon that took place in the past, future research that could expound upon the case study would include quantitative data analysis of the online tools and applications, as well as conducting qualitative long-interviews of the participants within the movement.

IX. Conclusion

In this case study of the Bernie Sanders Movement, a paradigm of postmodern public relations was presented. Public relations can serve a deeper role within society as opposed to the common belief that the profession can only serve the dominant coalition. Instead, public relations can offer fundamental change in society by publicizing varying ideas within the public sphere.

Through digital tactics, the Bernie Sanders Movement rejected the widely accepted notion that digital activism cannot spark true change within society. Instead, many within the millennial generation viewed this movement as a way to actively engage within democracy and contribute ideas in ways in which they are comfortable. The movement not only promoted active citizenship but also allowed the volunteers in favor of Senator Sanders to utilize tactics that promoted Senator Sanders' presidential platform, causing new progressive ideals to be presented before American democracy.

The main focus of the Bernie Sanders Movement was broader than a political campaign or Senator Sanders the individual; the movement's aim was to push a progressive platform and attempt to rid the United States government of corruption. This aim is evidenced by the fact that thousands within the movement

did not listen to Senator Sanders' endorsement for the Democratic presidential nominee, Hillary Clinton; instead, many Sanders supporters abstained from voting or voted for the third-party candidate that most aligned with the progressive platform: Jill Stein of the Green Party. Because Clinton was unable to connect with and further invigorate the Bernie Sanders Movement, movement members chose to vote for the candidate that most embodied their ideals (McBride, 2016).

As evidenced by the Bernie Sanders Movement, it can be argued that the future of digital activism relies on relationship and community building. The idea of hashtag activism transformed from "slacktivism" to legitimate advocacy through the Bernie Sanders Movement's strategy of building a community that bonded over the ideology presented by Senator Sanders. Instead of merely sending uncoordinated messages across online platforms, the community within the movement orchestrated coordinated communication strategies to raise awareness of the issues, help the campaign fundraise, as well as encourage fellow supporters to vote. The Bernie Sanders Movement can be used to demonstrate how relationship building through digital means can contribute to societal and cultural changes.

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