Illusions of Empowerment: Re-Interpreting the Blogger’s Social Media Dream

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ABSTRACT

This article calls into question the social media empowerment narrative and the underlying idea that social media platforms are empowering everyday netizens to have their voices heard. The author argues that social media technologies may simply privilege only those Internet users who are new media savvy and have leisure time to participate in the so-called digital democracy. While social media systems might have lowered the entrance threshold for civic engagement, hurdles such as the growing competition in an attention economy, the odds of standing out amidst millions of other individual voices, knowledge of new media technologies required to achieve visibility, and time demands make the social media empowerment vision more difficult to attain than the architects of the empowerment ideology have made the public to believe.

Keywords: Attention Economy, Digital Democracy, Empowerment Narrative, New Median Literacy, Public Voices, Social Media

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

When Canadian singer and songwriter Dave Carroll and his folk rock band “Sons of Maxwell” boarded a United Airlines flight from Halifax, Nova Scotia to Omaha, Nebraska in the spring of 2008, Carroll had no idea that he had embarked on a journey to YouTube stardom. The journey began when the members of the band looked out the airplane window on a scheduled stopover to change planes for a connecting flight at Chicago O’Hare International Airport just in time to see the baggage handlers carelessly throwing their guitar cases down on the tarmac. Carroll immediately reported the incident to flight attendants, only to be met with indifference and the recommendation to report the case in Omaha. Since the connecting flight did not arrive in Omaha until after midnight, there was no United Airlines representative available. The guitar cases looked undamaged and the tired musicians went to their hotel without further inspecting the equipment. Early in the morning the “Sons of Maxwell” left for a weeklong concert tour of Nebraska. When they finally unpacked the instruments during a sound check, Carroll’s worst fears were confirmed. The base of his $3,500 Taylor acoustic guitar had been smashed. What followed was a frustrating 9-month battle to get United Airlines to compensate the band for the repair costs. In the end, the airline declined the claim. Ironically, it was not because United representatives denied

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any mistreatment at the hands of airport baggage handlers. The customer, they alleged, had simply failed to complain to the right people at the right time and in the right place. Carroll (2009a) later recalled:

*It occurred to me that I had been fighting a losing battle all this time and that fighting over this at all was a waste of time. The system is designed to frustrate affected customers into giving up their claims and United is very good at it. However I realized then that as a songwriter and traveling musician I wasn’t without options.*

One option was to channel personal frustration creatively into a series of songs and take the battle with United Airlines customer service to the court of public opinion by means of social media. On July 6th 2009, over a year after baggage handlers had broken his beloved guitar, Carroll posted a song to YouTube and blogged about his experience with United on his web page. The song’s chorus pretty much sums up the band’s feelings:

*United... United...You broke my Taylor Guitar

United... United...Some big help you are

You broke it, you should fix it. You’re liable, just admit it

I should’ve flown with someone else, or gone by car

’Cause United breaks guitars.*

The song quickly gained steam on YouTube and racked up over 3 million views in only 11 days. Countless blog posts, tweets, and news stories about the band’s customer service saga added fuel to the fire. Feeling the heat and faced with a public relations nightmare, United Airlines reversed its earlier decision and called Carroll with a compensation offer. The amends came too late, though. In a video statement uploaded to YouTube on July 10th, Carroll rejected the money and vowed to release two more songs about his dealings with United.

This is the type of David versus Goliath story social media enthusiasts have been telling time after time. A corporate giant wrongs an unsuspecting consumer and the consumer strikes back, empowered by blogs and other social media tools. It is the story of Jeff Jarvis and his “Dell Hell” blog posts, of Vincent Ferrari and his audio-recorded attempt at closing his AOL account, of the JetBlue passengers recording their ordeal while trapped on the tarmac for 9 hours during a snow storm, or of the cable customer who filmed a Comcast technician falling asleep on his couch. In each of these cases, social media savvy consumers avenged themselves by taking their story online where it struck a chord with thousands, if not millions, of other consumers who could relate. These are feel-good stories, stories of good triumphing over evil and the conclusion they commonly lead the public to, is that social media outlets have given everyone a voice. The following YouTube comment from user Tubermind, made in response to the United Breaks Guitars video, nicely illustrates this feeling of personal empowerment engendered by these stories.

*United,
United... You broke dear Dave’s guitar

United, United... Some big bully you are!

You thought we had no voice... Instead we’ve got our Hero

And now you’ve got no choice... but to keep abuse at “Zero” (Tubermind, n.d.).

While it would be impossible to deny (and contrary to the purpose of this article) that all of the aforementioned Internet users successfully defended themselves against poor customer service or other corporate abuses and malpractices, the true question is whether these examples really warrant the generally accepted conclusion
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