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Book Review: The Revolution Will Not Be Televised

Joe Trippi's campaign memoir, "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised," is a solid, entertaining read. He provides a thorough, well-written account of then 2004 Dean For America campaign and attempts to highlight some of the campaign's online successes. Given my familiarity and experience with online communications through a political lens, I was surprised to find that the most informative parts of his book had very little to do with the Internet.

One of the first items that struck me about the book was his clairvoyance in regards to candidates and how to best interact with the modern political landscape. Early in the book he cites the importance of reaching out to what Malcolm Gladwell refers to as *connectors*, the linchpins of civil society who bring people together and give viral ideas traction. "There is something not everybody realizes about our political system," Trippi explains. "Not all voters are created equal."¹ He goes on to discuss the example of Gary Hart who believed that he could better push his message by making a genuine connection with one or two voters (who would then spread the word via their own networks of personal connections) than he could by giving a speech to a roomful of people.² Trippi also talks about the need for candidates to craft messages that breakthrough to voters by resisting the urge to water down their views. "[The] reliance on polling and focus groups is the worst trend in politics," Trippi says. "It substitutes candidate's convictions with bland, market-tested, centrist bullshit."³ By focusing on the opinion leaders of civil society, and by creating messages that people can get behind, candidates have the opportunity to make deeper, more meaningful connections with their voters.

Trippi's views on the tough choices foisted on campaigns by the modern political landscape were also very insightful. Early in the book he spoke to the difficult choices campaigns make in regards to using negative television advertisements. Trippi cites the example of the 1988 campaign, where Bush's negative ads pushed Dukakis' approval rating from 70 percent in June to 45 percent on Election Day.

Bush secured the win, but 70 percent of voters polled, said they wished they could have voted for someone besides Bush or Dukakis. Trippi summarized by saying that “the most effective ads are the ones that make the community a worse place to live in.”⁴ Turning his attention to fundraising, Trippi provides some interesting numbers here as well. “Between 1976 and 2000, the candidate who raised the most money ... in the year before the primary season was the party’s nominee every time,” Trippi points out.⁵ Under the current dominion of television, campaigns are reduced from noble wars of ideas to bloody fights for cash that can be converted into television spots. If Trippi is right -- and the Internet really will kill the television campaign -- this will be its most profound result.

When considering whether the Dean Campaign's Internet success will have any long-term staying power, two things come to mind. First of all, Trippi spends pages upon pages explaining that while the Internet was a great tool, the main benefits to the Dean Campaign happened offline. Trippi credits the face-to-face Meetup.com events in New York and Seattle, and the spontaneous coalescence of Dean Corps community volunteer activities across the nation. “That was the beauty of the Dean Campaign in the summer of 2003, the fact that it wasn’t the Dean Campaign” says Trippi. “People all across the country were engaging in civic life again.”⁶ Besides this, the true success of Dean’s Internet campaign was more about style than substance. Dean for America was the first campaign that tried to reinvigorate the electorate by giving campaign supporters direct access to the candidate and the campaign staff. This was manifested not only in rhetoric, but also in the very nature of all campaign communication. “When you read an email or a letter or a blog from the Dean campaign,” Trippi explains, “you knew there was a real person on the other end.”⁷ The involvement was not limited to just outgoing communication. Due to lack of resources, the campaign tried to harness the power of its supporters over the Internet. “There was any number of times one of those 600,000 would come up with something that should have been obvious to us,” Trippi says.⁸

Without argument, the book is an entertaining read from cover to cover, and Trippi uses real life events to show how society has changed and will continue to change in the future. Even if the reader

picks up nothing besides *television is evil* and *be authentic*, there is plenty here for people to extrapolate to campaigns of all kinds.

¹ Joe Trippi, *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised: Democracy, the Internet and the Overthrow of Everything*, (New York: Regan Books, 2004), 19.

² Trippi, 30.

³ Trippi, 36.

⁴ Trippi, 40.

⁵ Trippi, 79.

⁶ Trippi, 149.

⁷ Trippi, 143.

⁸ Trippi, 146.