

CAN AXELROD DO FOR MILIBAND WHAT HE DID FOR OBAMA?

EVERY GREAT LEADER MUST
BE A GREAT STORYTELLER



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Earlier this month,

Labour leader Ed Miliband made a star acquisition. Namely: David Axelrod, the political campaign mastermind who got Barack Obama through two staggering, against-the-odds victories in the 2008 and 2012 US presidential elections.

WE'LL HAVE TO SEE WHETHER AXELROD CAN DO FOR MILIBAND WHAT HE DID FOR OBAMA.

There's quite a big difference between the two men—one arguably America's most charismatic, appealing leader since JFK, the other described by 41% of the population as “weird” or “somewhat weird,” according to a recent YouGov poll.

But whatever his success or otherwise in the UK, Axelrod's legacy as an almighty campaigner is already secure. He's also a man who thinks like we do at Borkowski: he understands the power of the story.

In this short paper, we'll explore how Axelrod has made the power of narrative work in politics, and look at what you can learn from his achievements. We'll also investigate the pitfalls he might face in Britain, and what conclusions we can draw from those.

We'll lead you through using our four key principles. If you're interested in what you read and would like to get in touch, don't hesitate to email hello@borkowski.do or call 020 3176 2700.

PRINCIPLE ONE: Our commitment to the story.

Every great leader must be a great storyteller.

Stories are what inspire and excite humans, both to achieve great things, and to get others to work alongside them. All great cultures are built on the sharing of stories, and a great leader must understand this.

David Axelrod certainly understands this. To see the depth of his understanding, we need to go back before Obama's presidential campaigns to his days as an obscure state senator in Chicago. In 2002, Obama gave a speech at Federal Plaza in Chicago, on the urging of Chicago democrat socialite Bettylu Saltzman. The topic was to be a criticism of the Iraq war. Before he agreed to speak, Obama called Axelrod, who at that time he had worked with on and off for the best part of a decade.

AXELROD KNEW IT WAS A PIVOTAL MOMENT FOR THE YOUNG SENATOR.

He advised him to do the speech, to make sure he appealed to the Chicago liberals who were then paying his way but not to alienate a broader voter base. In the event, Obama smashed it out of the park (to borrow an American idiom). One line in particular had resonance – indeed is still quoted today by such liberal leading-lights as the New York Times: he warned of “an occupation of undetermined length with undetermined costs and undetermined consequences.” Axelrod knew that here was a man who could stick to a principle, could spin a narrative against a republican party seen as both callous and careless, yet do so responsibly, in a measured manner. The two were near inseparable from that point on.

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merican political sources tell us that Axelrod saw something else crucial in Obama before he decided to take him on: the power of his biography. Of course, the hope that the mixed-race Obama gives to minority groups throughout America is a powerful tool in any campaign manager's arsenal. But Obama has used his biography in far more subtle ways. Consider, for example, the pivotal moment in 2007 when he spoke about his Mairjuana use at a speech in New Hampshire. Obama – and Axelrod – must have known that any reporter worth their salt could only have one follow-up question: “Did you inhale?” Sure enough, the question came a few days later, setting Obama up for perhaps the warmest and funniest line of a first presidential campaign full of warm, funny lines: “I never understood that line,” Obama said of Clinton's famous denial when discussing the same issue. “The point was to inhale. That was the point.”

THIS IS ONE KEY AREA IN WHICH AXELROD'S ENGLISH ADVENTURE COULD FALL SHORT.

Miliband's biography is considerably less inspirational than Obama's, coming as he does from

firmly within the new British political tradition: wonkish family, top education, career party man. That said, one of Miliband's two most notable PR successes (along with his attack on the “big six” energy companies) was his battle with the Daily Mail. Last September, the Mail ran a smear campaign against (Ed) Miliband's father, Ralph. Miliband's response was one of dignified fury, standing up to the paper on any TV channel that would have him. For once, we saw him displaying genuine emotion. Axelrod is likely to search for similar biographical triggers.

“The point was to inhale. That was the point.”

PRINCIPLE TWO:

Our understanding of how to operate in the Now Economy

The Now Economy is our phrase for the confusing, troubling, exhilarating times in which we currently do business.

It's a tricky place. It requires both an instinctive and impulsive nature which welcomes disruption, and a willingness to knuckle down and listen to the data. Increasingly, communications spans so many channels and audiences that you need to mix a good amount of number crunching in with your gut feeling.

Among the US political community, Axelrod is known for his ability to do just that. He may have a great instinct for spotting unvarnished talent, but he also pays unwavering attention to the right polls and focus groups. Not only has this apparently underpinned his strategy throughout Obama's career, but it also sparked one of his few controversial moments in the limelight.

In 2012, Axelrod sent out a tweet questioning the methodology of a Gallup poll which showed rival Mitt Romney leading Obama during their presidential race. The tweet sparked scandalous headlines. The fact that Axelrod, usually a "backroom" figure, was willing to go to war over polling demonstrates that he understands the power of a well-placed, well-timed stat.

HERE, AGAIN, AXELROD MAY HAVE CAUSE FOR CONCERN.

Although Labour have sustained a consistent lead over the Tories in most voting intention polls, there are some structural weaknesses to their image when you dig in to the data. According to Peter Kellner, president of the UK pollster YouGov, Labour have lost ground in three aspects where they once held clear leads – providing more jobs (their lead down from 8% to 1%), keeping prices down (lead down from 6% to 1%) and “improving the standards of living for people like you” (9% lead down to 4%) (all figures as of April 22, 2014). Meanwhile, Kellner continues, two big Tory leads have grown bigger: managing the economy (lead up from 15% to 21%) and tackling government deficit (lead up from 22% to 29%). Axelrod will be looking hard at these figures and thinking what stories they tell about the Labour leader – about someone seen as good-hearted but perhaps not to be trusted with the helm of the country. Expect Miliband's future strategy to be carefully geared to overcome this.

PRINCIPLE THREE:

Our absolute belief in the need to develop coverage along unorthodox pathways.

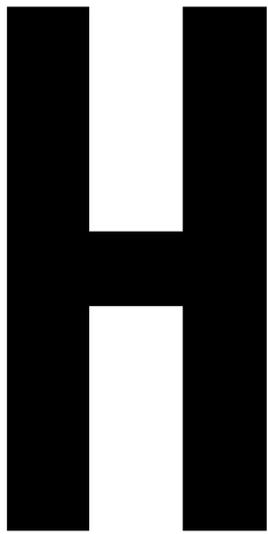
On this one, we take our hats off to the Obama campaign machine. In two elections, they've been helped to victory by their unrivalled command of the digital space.

In 2008, the Obama team was using Twitter, Facebook and Myspace with remarkable savvy at a time when most campaigners barely knew what these networks were. The team also constructed their own social network from scratch: My.BarackObama.com, which resurrected the glory days of American activist organising through savvy online communication.

In 2012, they kept the same grassroots strategy but expanded it, using dashboard (an updated version of my.barackobama) and a host of then-newfangled social networks: Pinterest (pegged to the eminently image-conscious Michelle Obama), Reddit (Obama did an AMA – a kind of community-sourced interview), Instagram and Google+.

On this one, Axelrod can't take all the credit;

Obama has had a host of supergeeks working for him at one time or another.



However we'd put money on the core tenets of the campaign coming from Axelrod. In both elections, the Obama digital strategy did so well because it put the individual activists first. For example, in 2008 supporters were rewarded by getting the news of Joe Biden's Vice-Presidential selection first, via SMS. Axelrod is steeped in the organised activist community of Chicago politics.

He may not do much door-knocking himself, but he understands the power of those small, special moments which get people out on the streets, knocking on doors for him.

In the UK, this could be trickier. While we have a competitive – and fast growing – tech sector, we simply do not have anything like the level of knowledge and sheer creative ability to be found in America's Silicon valley for any politician willing to spend on it. That said, Labour aren't badly placed to own the digital space, in terms of campaigning (tellingly, their emails always slip past the Google promotions filter and directly into the inbox of one of our researchers, for example), but also in terms of policy.

In March, Labour launched the "Digital Government Review", which aims to explore tech-focused policies for 2015 that will "transform the relationship between the citizen and the state."

PRINCIPLE FOUR:

The most successful campaigns, services and brands are designed around compelling ideas, brilliant stories, intelligent organisation and immaculate detail.

We believe strongly that without a central idea, a compelling, gripping, truthful heart to your narrative, you are lost. This we share with Axelrod.

Arguably the most memorable aspect of Obama's 2008 campaign was his thrilling slogan:

“yes we can.”

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n three words, it summed up everything Obama's voters wanted: change, empowerment, novelty, solidarity, strength, hope, freedom. All Obama's messaging, from press campaigns to the way he dressed, can retrospectively be seen to have spiralled outward from this central organising principle.

Like all master storytellers, of course, Axelrod knows there's no harm in stealing: yes we can was lifted from "Si Se Puede", a Venezuelan slogan used by early supporters of the late socialist leader Hugo Chavez.

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As Jean-Luc Goddard once said: "it's not where you take things from, it's where you take them to."

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It is here that Axelrod has the potential to make the biggest change to Labour. Miliband has expressed many powerful, individual memes: his attacks on the energy companies, his rallying cries on the cost of living, his commitment to local democracy. However, he has yet to bring them together under one cohesive banner ("One Nation," which sounds a bit like the name of a regional nightclub, doesn't count). If Axelrod can find Miliband's defining message, he could just bring this election home for Labour.

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In conclusion, being a great Now Economy communicator is about drawing a line between reason and madness, then walking it with determination.

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You don't have access to Axelrod, but you do have access to us. Give us a shout if you want to learn how: 0203 176 2700.

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WE SEE THINGS DIFFERENTLY

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