
A CYBERSPACE ODYSSEY

From live-streaming in outer space
to fugitive-hunting on American streets, social media
now dominates the public conversation.
Mashable's Pete Cashmore and Lance Ulanoff explore

INTERVIEW BY JESSE COMART, BRUNSWICK, NEW YORK

Mashable has a wide brief, describing itself as “the largest source of news, information, and resources for the Connected Generation.” It has also built a large following since its inception in 2005 as a tech blog, with 25m unique visitors to the website each month and 10m social media followers. The success of Mashable and its role as an arbiter of all things “social media” has often put founder/CEO Pete Cashmore and Editor-in-Chief Lance Ulanoff at the center of the swirl of endless commentary about the nature of media in this fast-changing era, constantly in demand for their views on what such-and-such a development means.

This was amply demonstrated in the aftermath of the Boston Marathon bombings, when Ulanoff was called upon to help explain the role that social media played in the event, particularly in a long piece by CBS News program *48 Hours*.


The segment was at times hyperbolic about the role of social media in catching the bombers with, for example, Eugene O'Donnell, a professor at John Jay College of Criminal Justice and a former New York cop and prosecutor, saying, “This is a watershed event ... validating the whole idea of social media. There were a million sets of eyes looking for these two guys. This represents a whole new way of thinking.” But the “crowd-sleuthing” segment also noted that mistakes were made, including identifying perfectly innocent people as potential suspects.

It was up to Ulanoff to provide some perspective: “There is tremendous value in everybody becoming foot soldiers in the quest to find the truth,” he told CBS correspondent Tracy Smith. But, he added, “At one point, I wrote, ‘I just wished I had a *fact filter* for Twitter.’”

Ulanoff's comment contained an essential truth about the debate surrounding social media: yes, it is an important phenomenon and it is undoubtedly changing the way people get information and helping to shape major events, especially in politics. But there is also a tendency for people to make overly confident assumptions about social media's real value – whether optimistic or pessimistic. The true nature of its role is being played out in real time, which makes it all the more important to have intelligent voices that can add value to the debate.

In this conversation with the *Brunswick Review*, Cashmore and Ulanoff bounce around some thoughts about social media's emergence and how it is evolving as an agent of change.

Having started Mashable as a tech blog with a consumer perspective, what was it that drove you to segue into covering social media in a big way?

Pete Cashmore: In 2007, we sat down and said, ‘You know, this social media thing is just huge, and it clearly reflects what we love about technology, which is this democratizing force. It's giving the tools to 



everyone.’ ... I think the big tipping point for Twitter was 2011, when we had the ‘Green Revolution,’ [the aftermath of the mass post-election protests in Iran, now recognized as ‘the first major world event broadcast worldwide almost entirely via social media,’ as *The Atlantic* put it]. That was the pivot point for social media and it was a year when we started to broaden, to say, ‘Okay, we get that Twitter and Facebook and all these things are vital tools.’

What did that pivot point mean for Mashable?

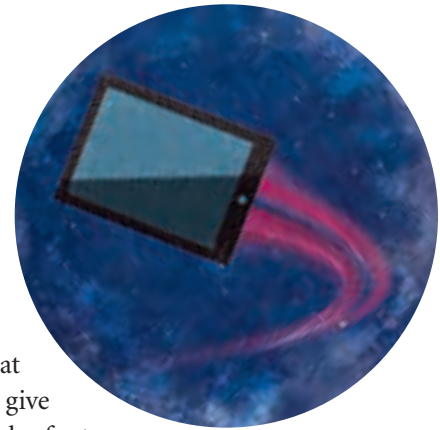
Lance Ulanoff: You know what’s funny? We talked in the 1990s about ‘it takes a village’ [referencing the African proverb and Hillary Clinton’s book]. And then, oh, it’s a global village. But now every event is a gathering of people together, talking about the same thing. Sometimes it is something as light as the Super Bowl. And sometimes it is as important as gun control. We’re just seeing the conversations happen at scale now. ... Obviously, [political] campaigns have been transformed by technology, by social media. We’ve learned a lot about the power of data.

You have said social media is low risk. Can you expand on that?

Pete Cashmore: I meant in terms of dollars. You sit in your office, you find something funny to do, and people say, ‘Hey, that brand is funny. I feel a connection.’ You can put very small investment into hundreds of ideas and then see which idea takes off. It’s also quite ephemeral. So, even if your first ‘Vine’ [a short-video application] is boring, your second or third might be better.

Lance Ulanoff: There is a low barrier to entry but the flipside is that there is some risk. You do have to be

smart about what you put out there. We’re always on the side of, ‘This is common sense, get out there and try it.’ The problem is there are some people who don’t use their common sense. Then there are some companies that are so risk-averse, they don’t give their employees the tools to be foot soldiers for their brands.



Entities in a position of authority – brands, governments, and so on – used to be able to say, “You have to listen to me.” Now, it seems, everyone is being forced into a two-way communication.

Pete Cashmore: We’ve seen this affect the ‘social good’ space especially. Now, there’s such a level of transparency that you have to genuinely have a good moral center as a business in order to flourish. All that talk around, ‘Well, we’re locally sourced,’ or, ‘We’re environmental,’ or, ‘We’re community orientated,’ or, ‘We do a lot for charity,’ suddenly becomes a lot more transparent. There’s no hiding.

Lance Ulanoff: Technology used to be seen as a part of commerce – you buy a gadget, you use it. But now it has expanded. We asked our audience if the internet should be a human right and people all said, ‘Yes’ – but that was a bit radical because, you know, broadband costs money to implement.

Pete Cashmore: It was one of those areas that people were very skeptical about, whether social media would ever be something that would make a difference. One of the biggest questions was, ‘We can get people talking about stuff but how are they going



PETE CASHMORE

Founder & CEO

Pete Cashmore founded Mashable in 2005 at the age of 19 “in his bedroom” in Aberdeenshire, Scotland.

In 2012, he made *Time* magazine’s “100 Most Influential People,” list being described as a “social news guru.” *Time* said of him, “Pete is fiercely intelligent and a tireless supporter of using social and digital platforms for good.” In September 2012, Cashmore

organized Mashable’s Social Good Summit, partnering with the United Nations Development Program and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

The summit – “where big ideas meet new media to create innovative solutions” – was opened by Hillary Clinton and took place at 200 “meetups” across the world, from Beijing, China to Mogadishu, Somalia.

to open their wallets and send us money?’ I think the point was missed about how important it *is* for us to get people talking and understanding issues, and feeling they could actually change stuff. The biggest problem for charity and giving efforts is, ‘I’m just a person. What can I do?’ It’s this connectivity that suddenly makes people decide, ‘Oh, well, if there’s a million other people doing this, then clearly I can make an impact here.’ But as Lance says, the big story is about connectivity, how cheap phones, cheap connectivity, have completely changed the developing world. So, for health, there was a lot of talk about health apps for self-diagnosis. If you’re hundreds of miles from a doctor but you have the equivalent of a Wikipedia for health, you can see what’s wrong with you, you can self-diagnose, or you can have someone at least in the town who can understand that stuff.

What about the “attention deficit,” where we move from long articles to blogs to Twitter to snapshot, Vines, Pinterest. Are we moving along a continuum, or is it a pendulum?

Pete Cashmore: The volume of stuff is not going to fall, but you’re going to get more and more tools for it. We’ve seen the first phase in social filtering: ‘What has the biggest conversation around it, what is the most interesting to the entire community?’

A second phase is personalization. That’s to say, ‘I can’t read everything on the web, but I’ve read the stuff that is most key to me that I need to read right now.’ I think that’s a broader trend of socially relevant filtering. And Twitter’s ‘Discover’ tab, which they launched at the end of 2011, does that. The algorithms are getting more and more sophisticated. So, I think more data is a good thing. It’s just that the data grew at a rate faster than the curation tools grew.

You said politicians and campaigns are doing particularly well using social channels and “big data.” Do you think companies lag behind on this?

Pete Cashmore: We’ve actually been pretty

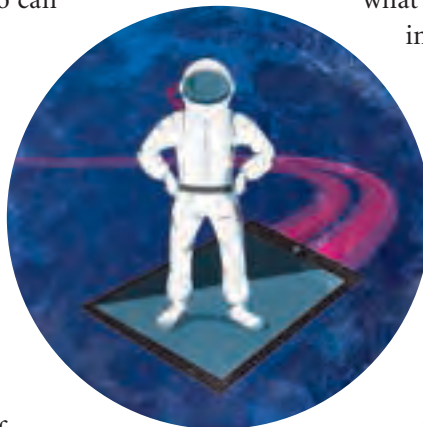
impressed, but then a lot of people who read Mashable are the digital people at bigger organizations. I think brands understand that social media is huge now; that it is a very low-risk thing and can have huge returns down the line. When Twitter launched, people weren’t sure what it was. ‘Is it the new customer service phone line? Is it PR?’ Turns out, it’s kind of all of the above ... Brands have gotten better and better at telling great stories. We’ve seen more and more examples of brands doing really great social media. Just last year, Red Bull dropped a guy from space. It’s not literally about drinking soda, but they knew that live-streaming this event would take off. Brands like that have started to understand that social media is really just what people are going to talk about, what they’re going to relate to and be inspired by.

Lance Ulanoff: As people get better at doing this, what is really fun and fascinating for us to cover is the varying degrees of their success and their failures. Failures are big learning tools.

Is technology changing the way people engage with governments, or is it just a way of consuming news?

Pete Cashmore: It has become so powerful for politics because it is the ultimate democratic system of media. You have an opinion on something, you can immediately voice it and see if others share your opinion – and feel like your voice can make a difference. That’s what’s crazy about it – your voice actually *can* make a difference. We’re always surprised by that: someone will tweet something, or be involved in a political event, or meet a candidate. The next day they’re on national television.

Lance Ulanoff: There are all these tools online. A White House petition that can generate tens of thousands of signatures, sometimes in the space of days. They went from 25,000 to 100,000 with the ‘Death Star’ petition [See box, page 75]. The White House is very savvy about understanding that you can’t simply say, ‘That’s stupid.’



“SOME COMPANIES ARE SO RISK-AVERSE, THEY DON’T GIVE THEIR EMPLOYEES THE TOOLS TO BE FOOT SOLDIERS FOR THEIR BRANDS”

Pete Cashmore: It shows a human face that says, ‘Hey, this is funny, and we’re going to respond in the same vein.’

Lance Ulanoff: Everybody loved it. And of course that became a big hit for us – we’re interested in cultural icons.

Pete Cashmore: A lot of cultural phenomena come out of the web. So, it’s become very powerful as a cultural starting point.

Lance Ulanoff: It’s your primary source of daily entertainment. Everything, from the big to the littlest things.

On the democratizing power of technology and social media, are the White House petitions – though a very visible, interesting manifestation – an exception? It doesn’t seem that US or European governments have changed all that much in response to technology.

Pete Cashmore: Are you separating campaigning from governance? Because, clearly, campaigning has come to be dominated by social media. But *WhiteHouse.gov* is incredibly powerful, too. For years they’ve had this Flickr feed where they show you almost behind the scenes what’s happening in the White House. That level of transparency is new. It is still controlled transparency – they’re still deciding what they’re going to put out there on the official feeds. But it’s a level of transparency that we haven’t had before. The weekly address is now posted to YouTube and quite a lot of people take the initiative to go remix it and cut it up and put music on it. If you want to autotune it to make more people watch the President’s address, then why not? You’re taking something that would have been bland and making it entertaining and making politics something that’s more accessible to more people.

Lance Ulanoff: You can see that some of the people in Congress get technology, and are fantastic and others not so much. I think the story is really interesting outside the US. With dictatorships, in particular, the way they control power, the way they maintain power, is through the control of information. These democratizing tools you talk about are allowing people on the ground to share important information. It’s creating revolutions. It is changing things in Africa. It is changing things in China. That’s the really fascinating and important story that we like to tell. They cannot use propaganda in the same way any more because there’s an undercurrent of information breaking through that doesn’t align with what people are being told by the government.

Do you think that “media curation” is limiting what people will read?

Pete Cashmore: That happened with TV before, right? If anything, TV has gone more that way. You have channels that are identifying explicitly with a certain viewpoint.

Radio, TV, newspapers and other media channels have been segmented in terms of politics. But you’re now talking about a much broader trend?

Pete Cashmore: Yes. It is possible to just subscribe to stuff that you agree with, because otherwise you could have a very stressful life where you’re just angry the whole time. By the same token, there have been studies that run counter to that. So, even very controversial, very ‘out there’ opinions have started to get more airtime. You go on YouTube, you can find a conspiracy about anything.

“NOW, PEOPLE GET NEWS NOT JUST FROM TV, NEWSPAPERS AND MAGAZINES, BUT RANDOM PLACES, SUCH AS FRIENDS, ACQUAINTANCES AND ORGANIZATIONS THAT ARE ALSO CURATING. EVERYBODY’S A CURATOR”



LANCE ULANOFF

Editor-in-Chief

Lance Ulanoff is a 25-year veteran of tech journalism, having “covered technology since PCs were the size of suitcases, ‘on line’ meant ‘waiting’ and CPU speeds were measured in single-digit megahertz.”

He joined Mashable in September 2011. Previously, he was Editor-in-Chief of *PCMag.com* and Senior Vice-President of Content for digital

publisher, Ziff Davis.

Ulanoff has a BA in journalism from Hofstra University in New York, where he serves on the university’s Communication Advisory Board. He makes frequent appearances on TV, and in his spare time draws cartoons. He tweets “all day long” and has more than 50,000 followers.

THE WHITE HOUSE STRIKES BACK

In September 2011, the White House launched a website that promised to respond officially within 30 days to all petitions garnering at least 5,000 signatures. Only a month later, that threshold was raised to 25,000. In December 2012, a petition to “Secure resources and funding, and begin construction of a Death Star” reached that threshold.

While some might have seen a reason to lament “open government” initiatives, the Obama administration saw an opportunity. Picking up on the *Star Wars* theme, the White House official response was titled, “This Isn’t the Petition Response You’re Looking For.” It starts:



“The administration shares your desire for job creation and a strong national defense, but a Death Star isn’t on the horizon. Here are a few reasons:

- ★ The construction of the Death Star has been estimated to cost more than \$850,000,000,000,000,000. We’re working hard to reduce the deficit, not expand it.
- ★ The Administration does not support blowing up planets.
- ★ Why would we spend countless taxpayer dollars on a Death Star with a fundamental flaw that can be exploited by a one-man starship?

However, look carefully ... and you’ll notice something already floating in the sky – that’s no Moon, it’s a Space Station!”

Just in case anyone doubted that this response had official sign-off, it points out that President Barack Obama is handy with a light saber, linking to a photo on the White House Flickr page – where he parries with the US Olympic fencing team. Given that NASA’s Space Shuttle program came to an end during Obama’s tenure, the response makes sure to point out that “the President has held the first ever White House science fairs and an Astronomy Night on the South Lawn



because he knows these domains are critical to our country’s future, and to ensuring the United States continues leading the world in doing big things.”

Finally, the White House urges the public to help “build the future” by pursuing a career in STEM: science, technology, engineering or math. “If you do pursue a career in a [STEM]-related field, the Force will be with us!” It finishes with a Darth Vader quote: “Remember, the Death Star’s power to destroy a planet, or even a whole star system, is insignificant next to the power of the Force.”

Two days later, the White House raised the petition threshold to 100,000 signatures.

Laura Dudley, Brunswick, New York

Lance Ulanoff: Now, people get news not just from TV, newspapers and magazines, but random places, such as friends, acquaintances and organizations that are also curating. Everybody’s a curator. But you cannot assume that everybody you’re engaged with on social media shares your views. If you buy the *New York Post* every day, you know it is going to cover things in a certain way. But now people aren’t buying a lot of newspapers – maybe they are following the *Post* online, but they’re also following 50, 100 other sources.

Pete Cashmore: Pursuing more niches grows expertise. *The New York Times* tech section, for example, is extremely good but is more about broad trends. But you can become an expert in virtually any topic just by following the output on those topics, whether it’s on Twitter, an RSS, blogs. The access to specialized information is incredibly good. There’s much more of

an opportunity to pursue it without any guidance – a kind of self-guided learning. I think that will actually pay dividends for people like me. It’s one reason I think these curation tools will need to stay good at the niche stuff. I think people will get much, much better at very, very niche things. In the early days, I would subscribe to all the tech news sources – I just wanted to know everything about tech. As Mashable and social media have evolved, you start to have an appreciation for politics, or fashion even. Culture is a big thing across all these social networks. It’s an exposure to a broader number of things that you wouldn’t necessarily have opted to learn about. But because your friends are talking about it, you become more engaged with more things. ☺

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