

# Swimming in social media's fast changing tide

Posted by [Yasmin Crowther](#) [1] on Aug 22, 2012

Social media is continually changing how companies engage with consumers and activists, says the lead writer of a new report from Ethical Corporation and Useful Social Media

The social media sea has grown to be a mightily stormy place. New topics are seized upon for debate every second. Sometimes the social media swarm can co-ordinate to turn on a company or issue like a pack of hunting sharks going for the kill.

At other times, social media is more playful and pokes fun at an organisation, satirising its strategy, mocking its tone of voice, and toying with it as a dolphin might play with a ball.

More often than not, what gets washed-up on the shore after the storm, is a battered brand that must then get back to basics to understand where it went wrong, the role it played in provoking the social media maelstrom, and how to do better next time.

[Communications, Campaigns and Social Media: how companies respond to consumers and activists in a crisis](#) [2] – a new report from Ethical Corporation and Useful Social Media – provides an array of case studies. These illustrate how activists – including Greenpeace, 38 Degrees, Invisible Children, MoxyVote and others – have successfully used social media to mobilise campaigns and change policy and behaviour at companies such as Nestlé, Mattel, Facebook, Shell, as well as the UK government and beyond.

## Specific online strategies

Companies are responding to these challenges – by developing specific online social media strategies and policies (such as Coca-Cola). They are carefully monitoring social media trends, issues and sentiment (using specialist tools such as MeaningMine). They are taking great care to ensure their engagement and tone is genuinely responsive to concerns and questions (for example, Toyota). And they are finding new ways to collaborate using social media to co-create solutions (such as Unilever's Sustainable Living Lab) and get beyond conventional Q&A interactions.

From the activist side, it's overwhelmingly apparent that the role of social media in galvanising social and corporate change is work in progress.

While Greenpeace stands out as the preeminent user of social media to mock, name and shame companies into a change of policy, other organisations are also working hard at pulling different corporate levers, with varying degrees of success.

Indicative of how fast things are moving, since the research for the new report was completed, MoxyVote – an organisation which encourages individual shareholders to vote with their values on issues of corporate policy – has decided to close.

The decision isn't to do with shareholder apathy – MoxyVote has been gaining some 20,000 new users a month since September 2011. Rather, it sees the regulatory system as posing rigid blocks and deterrents to the potential impact of those users.

MoxyVote isn't giving up – it's closing the site to pursue regulatory reform, while the likes of ProxyDemocracy and CorpGov continue the online campaign.

## Clicktivist power

More positively, 38 Degrees has picked up over 100,000 signatures as part of its Big Switch Campaign to convene a marketplace of clicktivists to negotiate and "take the power back from big gas and electricity companies" on price-setting.

Founder and executive director of 38 Degrees David Babbs told us: “No one has done this before ... we don’t know if it will work.” A matter of weeks later and 38 Degrees has successfully negotiated an offer from Co-operative Energy.

Babbs blogs: “200,000 households will be offered an average saving of £123 a year. An estimated 35,000 households, currently on the worst value tariffs, could reduce their bills by over £200.”

Success or failure, it’s some of these more innovative uses of clicktivism – to galvanise individual shareholders to challenge boards, or to convene a group of people to renegotiate tariffs – which point the way to some of the most exciting impacts and influences to be achieved via social media in leveraging people power.

### **‘The rules have changed’**

From the research for the report, a couple of quotes stand-out as defining this new territory. One is from Invisible Children, the makers of the half-hour documentary Kony 2012, which secured over 100 million views in a matter of days.

The film opens with the words: “Right now, there are more people on Facebook than there were on the planet 200 years ago, and it is changing the way the world works; governments are trying to keep up and older generations are concerned – the rules have changed.”

The other comment is from Roger Hammond, development director of the Living Earth Foundation, who told us that many social media campaigns just leave him wondering: “So what? Social media may be good for headcount, but it’s not always so good for comprehension.”

It’s within this extreme bandwidth – from “so what?” to “changing the world” – that brands and companies must now find new ways to navigate, cooperate and collaborate and ultimately play their own part in social media’s evolution and impact.

Our [new report](#) [2] should hopefully provide some pointers on the journey.

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### **Links:**

[1] <http://www.ethicalcorp.com/users/yasmin-crowther>

[2] <http://reports.ethicalcorp.com/reports/smcc/>