

Analysis

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Thanks for sharing? US politicians' online tone seeks an authentic like

Ex-congressman Beto O'Rourke Instagrammed his dentist appointment. Senator Elizabeth Warren guzzled a beer on the same online platform. And an unfiltered Senator Cory Booker sends video selfies to young users on Snapchat. These American politicians may or may not be running for president in 2020, but they are united in their savvy social media use to raise their national profiles, appear more relatable to new voters, and rake in millions of dollars in donations.

The approach - even when desperately oversharing personal lives online - is a bold one, full of promise and some pitfalls. A fresh generation of Democratic lawmakers, and a few canny veterans, are pioneering the new social media strategy they hope will help them topple US President Donald Trump. Today's digital age is a startlingly frank and revealing one, and some lawmakers are embracing it, political risks be damned.

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez was tending bar one year ago, but now, as a new Democratic member of Congress, the 29-year-old New Yorker has 2.3 million Twitter followers and, perhaps more intriguingly, 1.7 million on photo- and video-sharing platform Instagram. While Ocasio-Cortez posts about policy, she also shares videos of herself showing off dance moves, or cooking macaroni and cheese.

At first glance they are just glimpses into the everyday world of the lawmaker known simply as AOC. But she and others are gambling big time on bringing along thousands or even millions of viewers on their life journey. That could make all the difference for those running for president in 2020. "If you're not... making serious investments online, you likely have zero shot in the Democratic primary," said Adam Parkhomenko, a consultant and former staffer for 2016 Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton. "It's probably the most important thing that a campaign can do," he told AFP in an interview.

Relatable

Online personal brand promotion is being embraced by politicians, especially those who came of age in the 21st century and recognize its importance. "They're using it to get out their message, and it works," Parkhomenko said. The idea that non-presidential imagery or messaging is taboo for White House candidates is almost trite today. The president himself is famous for pushing the boundaries of decency on his favorite platform, Twitter. "Things have changed a ton in the last two or three years," Parkhomenko added. "You want to support someone that you can relate to" - even if that means watching them shop, jog, drive through their district or see a doctor.

Enter O'Rourke, whose visit to a dentist in his hometown of El Paso, Texas for a conversation about life near the US-Mexico border triggered an avalanche of reaction online. "So, I'm here with Diana, my dental hygienist," O'Rourke says to kick off the video on Instagram, where he has 760,000 followers. The clip shows O'Rourke, 46, wearing a protective green bib as Diana removes an electric polishing tool from his mouth after cleaning his pearly whites. "Even for me, this is Too Much Instagram," complained one user.

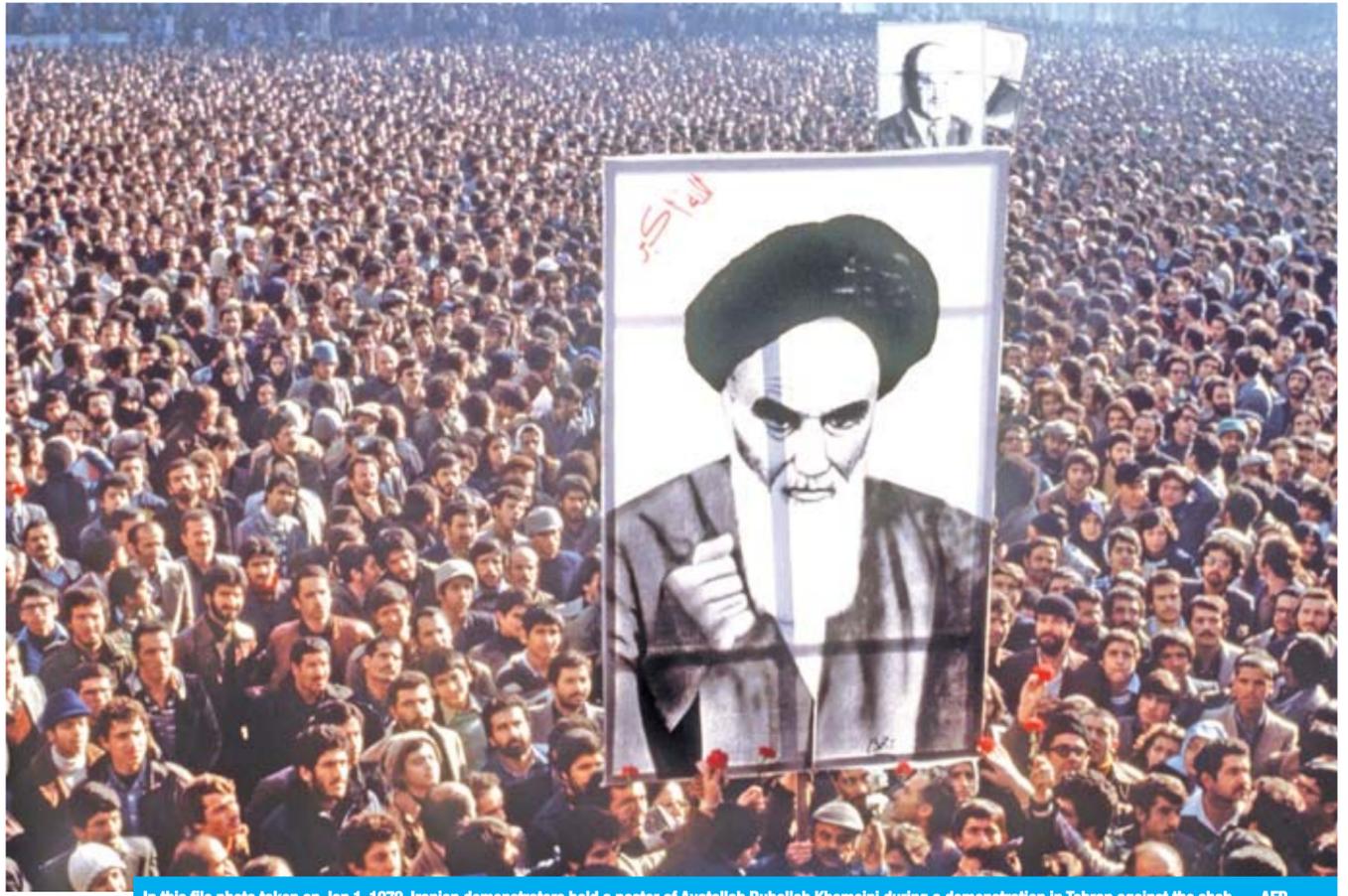
O'Rourke may well have sought to improve his brand image, but the visit also brought up the issue of dental coverage. "Beto better have an answer now about dental care," said American University communications professor Scott Talan.

How much is too much?

Lawmakers were not always so revealing. But Talan says a new generation of tweeters and Instagram users in Congress are revealing their daily lives more than ever. Talan says voters should expect more everyday life clips from presidential hopefuls, pushed to the screens of millions of Americans who never log off. But the transparency is mostly illusory, with the risk of coming off as inauthentic. When Warren, 69, recently livestreamed herself drinking a Michelob Ultra, it unleashed a provocative debate. "This is where you get into serious questions about... politicians overreaching," Talan said. "Even a beer opening on Instagram has risks and can ring inauthentic."

But it nevertheless can ring in big money. Instagram is owned by Facebook, and the megasite is likely optimized to comb through enormous data sets gathered from the millions of users who watch Warren, O'Rourke, Booker, Bernie Sanders, Kamala Harris, Joe Biden, and other politicians on Instagram. So even if Beto's teeth-cleaning was cringeworthy and substance-free, it could help his campaign target Facebook ads or messages at the thousands of users who watched his livestream.

These political messengers are seeing their followings grow with every personable clip. But how intimate will politicians' postings get? "We won't know how much is too much until we reach it," Talan said. — AFP



In this file photo taken on Jan 1, 1979, Iranian demonstrators hold a poster of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini during a demonstration in Tehran against the shah. — AFP

Passions ran high as last shah fled Iran

For months before the last shah fled Iran ending 2,500 years of royal rule, shopkeeper Ahmad Sheikh-Mehdi witnessed the fervor sweeping his country, heralding the arrival of the Islamic revolution. Forty years ago, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who had dubbed himself the "King of Kings", flew out of Iran on January 16, 1979 after mass uprisings across the country. His departure paved the way for the triumphant return on February 1, 1979 of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini from exile in France, and was ultimately to usher in the Islamic Republic.

"Everyone was transformed by the revolution. We felt hopeful," said Sheikh-Mehdi, who at the time was a shopkeeper's assistant in Tehran's Grand Bazaar. The bazaar was one of the hotbeds of support for the revolutionaries, a bastion of tradition closely allied to the clerics who opposed what they saw as the shah's Westernising and secularizing project. Sheikh-Mehdi remembers that time vividly, but what sticks most in his mind is the dervish - an Islamic mystic - who strode the bazaar's long corridors in the months before the shah fled, repeatedly chanting what amounted to a prophecy. "Nothing will be good until we are good. Before long, the tables will turn on this age," Sheikh-Mehdi, now 76, recited. "And the tables did turn," he added.

'People had passion'

The shah and his wife fled to Egypt, beginning 18

months of wanderings which led them as far as the United States and Mexico before Pahlavi wound up back in Cairo where he died from cancer on July 27, 1980 at the age of 60. The shah's power had begun to crumble before he left the country, when in January 1978 Etefak daily newspaper was ordered to publish an article seen as insulting to Khomeini. Demonstrations by theology students were violently crushed and the funerals of the victims sparked a cycle of fresh protests and repression.

Unrest mounted through 1978 and the bazaar frequently shut down in support of the protesters. "A young man would run into the bazaar, let out a sharp whistle and shout 'They're here!', and we'd all close shop and go join the protests," remembered 77-year old Ebrahim Almasi, who still runs a suit stall. He misses that burning revolutionary spirit, inspired by Khomeini's charisma. "People had passion back then. Blood was flowing," he said. Sheikh-Mehdi recalled how he would buy eggs for striking workers, part of the widespread solidarity felt at the time. "People would come and ask if we were short and give us money... We helped people as much as we could," he said.

'Life is short'

Educated in Switzerland, Pahlavi ascended the throne on Sept 16, 1941 at the tender age of 21. The insecure

young king did not gain real authority until 1953 when a CIA-backed coup removed his highly popular prime minister, Mohammad Mossadegh, who was trying to nationalize the country's oil. Flush with the country's petrodollars, the shah became one of the best customers of the US defense industry and a bulwark against Soviet influence.

But his Western-inspired reforms triggered tumultuous social change that angered the clergy, while his consolidation of power and brutal secret police earned him a reputation as a tyrant. Opposition to the shah and the aura of corruption around the Tehrani elite brought together an unlikely but powerful coalition of radical Islamists, who opposed the quietism of the traditional clergy, and left-wing students motivated by anti-colonial movements around the world.

The 40th anniversary of the shah's departure comes at a difficult time for Iran and Tehran's iconic bazaar as renewed US sanctions and poor management have plunged the country's economy into recession. Sheikh-Mehdi said this was precisely the time to return to the religious roots of the revolution. He still draws inspiration from Imam Ali, a son-in-law of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). "We all need to remember life is short, and we will be judged," he said. — AFP

Czech student Palach set himself alight for freedom 50 years ago

Jan Palach was a student activist who burnt himself to death 50 years ago this week to protest at the Soviet-led occupation of then Czechoslovakia. "He loved history and he was also interested in philosophy," Ivana Zizkova, who went to school with Palach, told AFP of the young man, an introvert always immersed in books and magazines. "He was good-looking. Very close to his mother," added Zizkova, who was in the same class as Palach at the school in the Czech town of Melnik just north of Prague. "And what was unusual during the Communist era: He dared to argue with the professors when he disagreed with them," added the now 70-year-old pensioner.

Three years after they passed their school-leaving exams, Palach, studying philosophy at Charles University in Prague, set himself alight in the central Wenceslas Square on Jan 16, 1969. He wanted Czechoslovaks to resist a new hardline regime absolutely loyal to the Kremlin, following the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968 which crushed a liberal movement called the Prague Spring. With burns to 85 percent of his body, Palach died on Jan 19, aged 20. His funeral in Prague was attended by 100,000 silent mourners.

Mobilize the nation

"I was travelling from Prague to Melnik and in the newspaper I saw a tiny story: 'Student JP set himself alight in Wenceslas Square,'" recalled Zizkova. "Then I learnt that it was Honza. Of course I was shocked," she added, calling Palach by the diminutive of his first name. "He had something of a genius in him. He could see farther than the rest of us. He tried to mobilize the nation." "I admire him, and I still have goose bumps. He sacrificed his life so young," she said.

Palach was born to a modest family in the village of Vsetaty near Melnik. His father, who died in 1962, was a confectioner whose shop had been confiscated by the Communists, while his mother was a shop assistant at a kiosk at the local railway station. "In 1967 and 1968, Jan took part in voluntary work camps in the Soviet Union," says Jana Beranova, head of the Vsetaty-based Jan Palach Society.

"He was shocked by the contrast between Soviet reality and the propaganda," she told AFP. "He refused to succumb to the lethargy that gradually overtook society after the occupation. He called for a general strike - in vain. And then he made his decision," Beranova said. At dawn on Jan 16, 1969, Palach took a train from Vsetaty to Prague. In his dormitory room, he reviewed his manifesto. It demanded that the regime drop censorship and ban the Zpravy magazine, which had been distributed since August 1968 by the Soviet occupation forces and was spreading fake news.



In this file photo taken on Jan 24, 1969, flowers and candles by people of what was then Czechoslovakia pay tribute to Jan Palach (portrayed) in Wenceslas Square in downtown Prague. — AFP

Taking responsibility

At noon he bought two plastic buckets and four litres of petrol in a street adjacent to Wenceslas Square and bearing the name of Jan Opletal, a student killed by the Nazis three decades earlier. At half past two, Palach arrived at the National Museum at the top of the busy square, poured the petrol over his body and struck a match. "There are moments in history when you have to do something," he later managed to murmur in his hospital bed. Several "human torches" followed his example across eastern Europe, including two Czechs - student Jan Zajic on Feb 25 and technician Evzen Plocek on April 4 of the same year.

Twenty years later, anti-Communist dissident Vaclav Havel was detained as he laid a flower at the top of Wenceslas Square to commemorate Palach on January 16, 1989, sparking the so-called Palach Week of anti-Communist protests. Havel became the country's president after the peaceful Velvet Revolution finally overthrew the Communist regime later in 1989, four years before Czechoslovakia split into the Czech Republic and Slovakia. — AFP

Justice at last for Kosovo's 'second class victims'?

Twenty years after the war for Kosovo's independence, victims of alleged war crimes committed by ethnic Albanian guerrillas have all but given up hope of justice. Now, finally, relief may be on the horizon. Kosovo's press is speculating feverishly that an EU-backed international court, based in The Hague, could this week issue its first indictments for Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) veterans who led the 1998-99 independence war.

Tiny Kosovo's Albanian population suffered most in the conflict against much-stronger Serbia, which ended with an 11-week NATO bombing campaign. But a section of Kosovo's ethnic Albanian population, as well as the territory's minority Serb and Roma, were targeted by the KLA and feel their suffering has been forgotten. They refer to their fallen as "second-class victims". "This tribunal presents the last chance to shed light on the assassinations in Kosovo," said Beriana Mustafa, a 36-year-old journalist in Pristina, whose father was murdered outside his house after criticising rebellion commanders.

The world's attention has focused on atrocities committed by Serbian forces under strongman Slobodan Milosevic, who died in prison in The Hague in 2006 while awaiting trial on 66 counts of genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. While leaders on the Serbian side have been judged and sentenced by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), no KLA leaders have been sentenced. "Hope is always the last to die," said Natasa Scepanovic, 54, who leads an association of Serb victims still holding out for justice. Her own father's body was discovered in 2003, years after he was killed. Her mother is one of about 1,700 people still listed as missing.

Kosovo's prime minister, Ramush Haradinaj, was acquitted by the ICTY for alleged crimes committed when he was a KLA commander. The court also exonerated ex-commander Fatmir Limaj, who heads a political party now in Kosovo's governing coalition - a slap in the face for many KLA victims.

The Kosovo conflict left more than 13,000 dead, including some 11,000 ethnic Albanians, 2,000 Serbs, and about 500 Roma. The territory of some 1.8 million people unilaterally declared independence from Serbia in 2008, but Belgrade still regards Kosovo - recognized as a state by over 100 UN members - as its southern province. In 2008, crimes allegedly committed by the KLA were highlighted in a book published by former ICTY prosecutor Carla del Ponte. — AFP