

I Have a Plan

By Ibrahim Jouhari

Sara woke up lazily, yawning. It was a Sunday, and she overslept. With her eyes closed, she reached over to her communicator: a slim and transparent plastic rectangle on which all her data, communication, work, and onto which her entire life was projected.

“Good morning,” said Emmy, the Virtual Assistant.

“Hi, Mimi!” Sara loved her assistant. Punctual, knowledgeable, and unintrusive. She knew when to bother her and when to hide in the background waiting for the right moment.

“Please check when I’m meeting with the gang and what we decided for today. Oh, and please make sure to give me a four minute brief of the latest developments on the moon colony and whether the supply issue has been resolved.”

“I’m sorry, Miss Sara, but today is election day, and on E-day, all your communications are blocked until you vote.”

“Those tyrants! I DON’T want to vote, and no one can force me to! Anyways there are no candidates I like. The greens are too far on the left, while the brown party is too conservative to my liking. The local representative candidates are even worse! That old man is running again, and he is the wors...”

“I understand, Miss Sara, but the vote is mandatory. If you do not like the candidates, you can cast a blank vote. Or you can even run. You have many friends and circles, and you guys could form a list with an agenda that fulfills all your aspi...”

“NO WAY, I hate politics! Ugh. Just show me who is running, and let us get over with this ASAP.”

“That was the last vote. I’m proud of you, Miss Sara. You voted blank only twice out of 24, and you really thought about your choices. This is how Democracy thrives. Remember in the ugly years when participation dropped and those awful people were able to vote in a President that barely represented 30% of our population and almost took us to war?”

“Yeah yeah. But then the great election came, and a wave of new young candidates were voted in, and the first thing they did was change the electoral law, favoring full participation above all. I still remember my history lessons. Thank you. But I am angry. Forcing me to vote is not acceptable. Where is my freedom of choice? Abstaining is part of the democratic process, remember? You know what? I will take your advice. Please call Zeina.”

“Of course, Miss Sara, calling Zeina.”

“Hi Zeina, free to talk?”

“Hi Sara, tell me. I’m running four different real-time simulations though.”

“Meet me in an hour, I have a plan,” whispered Sara.

It was her favorite place. Somewhere between a coffee shop, virtual gateway, hippy hangout spread over three stories with different moods. The coffee shop was your typical barista heaven, the second floor was filled with splashy neon signs and blinking colors surrounding the immersion pods that people stepped into to connect with their virtual avatar and worlds, and the last was a very laid-out hangout on the roof with a small pool and a panoramic virtual view of the

sprawling Beirut filled with long towers. It looked over the sea on one side, and on the other a quaint village appeared behind the city, with old Lebanese houses wearing red tile roofs.

From the total immersion suit, Sara got into a heated exchange with her friends.

She raised her voice, addressing Ziad, who was floating in the air to a background of heavy urban themes filled with fog and old 1920 buildings and cars.

“We can’t accept that some politicians can force us to vote. It is our choice.”

“I understand, Sara, but we are not forced. You can stay away from your communicator for 12-14 hours. No?” Ziad asked firmly.

Shocked, most of those present reacted and started talking simultaneously.

“Are you crazy? 12 hours without access...”

“This is madness!”

“I have the right to stay connected, we fought a bloody war for...”

“Hey hey, guys. Guys! Calm down. Ziad is older. He can still remember when they used those bulky devices with limited battery and bandwidth. They had time off-grid. Give him a break,” interjected Zeina, trying to maintain the peace.

“Yes, but that was then. Today this is not acceptable. We need to start campaigning; each in their cluster. Let’s see where others stand on this and whether they will support us to lift the voting mandate,” explained Sara.

“I like our group, guys, but I am uncomfortable pushing for that. I was around during the Ugly Years, and I witnessed and suffered from extreme politics. You all know this: when turnout rates drop, extremism rises!” said Ziad.

“We have enough propaganda from the channels and even our V.A.! Enough with toiling the official line.”

“Sara, it’s not the official line. I truly believe this. But anyways, if you want to continue down this path, I’m stepping out. Sorry guys.”

Just like that, Ziad’s avatar disappeared from their virtual room on Europa Moon, a breathtaking projection of Jupiter’s red eye filled his space.

“Now what?” asked Zeina.

“We keep going. He will come around when we’re successful. I’m tired. Let’s start exploring our circles’ views, and we’ll meet again in four hours?”

And one by one, the rest of her friends agreed and winked out of existence. Only Zeina stayed.

“Are you sure about this? The Voting Mandate is important.”

“Zeina! We’re not against the Mandate. We are just giving people a choice to exercise their free will. We’re only adding abstention as a choice. How could adding choices be wrong?”

“I hope so,” Zeina disappeared, leaving Sara lost in her thoughts overlooking Jupiter’s stormy red eye.

Sara was running late. She should start her shift and get in contact with her assigned circle. She donned her new work immersion set provided by the company. It had much better fidelity both in sound and image. The manufacturer claimed 97.8% realism. Unfortunately, she couldn't use it for her personal sessions. It was reserved for work.

Sara liked her work. It was a mixture of doing PR and being the company's spokesperson and representative. Most people these days have such jobs. Robots and A.I. now handle almost all manual labor, manufacturing, and service jobs. Nevertheless, human interaction and communication were still the purviews of humans like her. And Sara was the best at her work.

She set about communicating with her assigned circle for the day.

"I understand, sir, but your apprehensions are misplaced. MetaInfinity does not sell your personal data without your agreement. I can assure you of that. Let me show you the end user agreement you signed when you opened your account, and these are all the amendments you signed. Clearly, your data is your own, as promulgated in the E.U., U.S., MENA Union, the Asiatic Forum, and African Commonwealth privacy laws."

"What about the ads? I started getting ads for new and improved immersion suits with five senses feedback after I signed up for the extra immersion service."

"Sir, you were offered to pay 5,559.99\$ a month for that service or the selling of your consumer behavior data. You chose to sell. You are free to rescind that decision anytime, and your data will be deleted as long as you pay the subscription."

"Oh. Nevermind then, a few ads won't harm anyone, I suppose. "

They all balk at paying and prefer to sell their data, Sara thought. Oh well, she did the same.

She was about to deal with the next issue with an important client when her boss popped into her virtual space.

"Sara, the silver-tongued!"

"You know I don't like that nickname," she protested half-heartedly. But she loved the fact that people recognized how good she was at her job.

"But it's the truth!" he smiled. "Anyways, I have an urgent issue for you to deal with, and you're going to hate me for it."

"Oh no."

"One of our best clients, Senator Antoine, is running for president and has a new track to push. But he needs to test it on a small group with the steady hand of a top professional."

"Come on. I hate the guy!"

"Really? Well, I think you're going to love him. Haven't you been going around trying to drum up some support for a partial lift of the Mandate?"

Sara blushed. Damn, how did he know, she thought. "It's nothing really. It has nothing to do with the comp...."

"No worries, Sara, I kinda like your idea. And the Senator does too. Go on, listen to what he has to say, and try to manage his town hall attendees and their interactions. Then talk with him."

"Fine."

The people were slowly filling in the virtual town hall, an almost exact replica of the main hall of the Senator's town, but no one liked Real Life (R.L.) meetings these days. After three pandemics, people became weary of face-to-face contact. In addition, politics has become quite violent in the past few years, and everyone felt safer in Immersion Meetings.

Sara fast-read the data packet for the Town Hall meeting, arming herself with all she needed to know. She took control of the backend admin panel that gave her full powers over the events. She could mute or censor profanity and kick people out with little to no delay. But mainly, she was supposed to have an initial chat, get a basic feel of the attendees, and pick up those who brought some interesting insights within the Senator's parameters.

Her avatar moved along the seats that were slowly filling, listening in on the various discussions. She approached an old couple that was visibly enthusiastic.

"How are we today, folks? Excited to chat with the Senator?"

"Very much so! He has our full support. We hate the Mandate. It is not fair that everyone votes. You need to want it! We used to wait for hours in line in the old times."

"Indeed. The Senator campaign will be focused on tweaking the Mandate."

Another group of young voters chimed in and expressed their enthusiasm, explaining how much they hated the mandate and being forced to vote.

Then she was in her zone, zipping from one group to another, talking them up, taking notes, and raising their enthusiasm and interactivity levels. The Senator avatar shimmered into existence on the raised platform in the town hall, with two lights shining on him, and the blue background contrasting with his light gray suit. He was welcomed with thunderous applause, and a standing ovation. The audience was captivated by the Senator's words and flow, 'spontaneously' erupting in chants and slogans that Sara had been slipping into her conversations with the audience before the event.

Every word, color, hue, and pattern of the Senator's appearance was chosen by a team of experts and tested in hundreds of surveys. They were chosen for the specific effects they produced on the audience and the different emotional responses they elicited. It was a science that Sara was starting to get into, although she felt that it was too intrusive, bordering on brainwashing.

Sara stood in the back, interacting with the control panel that recorded every verbal, non verbal, and even unconscious reaction of the audience. The surveillance tool set was so precise that it could measure heartbeats, skin temperature, perspiration of all the present in the town hall. Meanwhile, in the office Zeina was receiving all that data, and used her skills and knowledge to analyze it and send to Sara all the important insights. This allowed Sara to understand the reaction of the audience in real time, and give the Senator immediate feedback.

She whispered in his ear, while he drank his water or waited for applause to die off. "they really liked the line on the unfairness of the Mandate, and how it infringes on their rights. However,

stay away from saying anything about canceling the mandate, it raised a lot of negative reactions, especially in the older age brackets. Focus instead on tweaking or slight change, and repeat the fact that you are completely against any canceling of the mandate.” The Senator slightly nodded and continued his speech.

As the meeting was coming to an end, and the audience were shimmering out of existence, she was left alone with the Senator.

“I told you she was good,” a third person spoke, from the far left of the hall.

Sara was startled, she was sure no one was there. Looking around her, she couldn’t find the source of the voice. Yet, it spoke again. “Sara the silver tongued!”

Slowly her boss materialized. He was watching the whole speech using an administrator's incognito mode. Although such modes were frowned upon and sometimes banned outright in public political events, it seemed that the Senator allowed it.

“Indeed, she is! So Sara, are we going to do this? Are you onboard?”

“Very much so.” And just like that she became Senator Antoine chief of campaign, supported by her boss' strong corporate support.

Life became a blur. Sara and Zeina had to physically relocate to the Senator’s district, joining his H.Q. with its top notch immersion set up and almost endless bandwidth. Sara jumped from one meeting to another, chatting with people, changing their mind, and nudging them along. Meanwhile, Zeina was always in the background analyzing the mountain of data and feeding Sara with the important insights. Sara used all of that to draft strong-worded Op-Eds and articles disseminated under many aliases, or even picked up by some famous journalist. Slowly the Senator became a national and even international sensation, and his efforts to change the mandate became the number one trending topic on the main social and total immersion networks.

But the pebble that flooded the gates was the national debate against another hot shot candidate that was fully supporting the mandate.

“Removing the mandate is dangerous. Turnout will drop and the extremists on both sides of the aisle will grow stronger!” explained Senator Ahmad.

“Nonsense! First we are only amending the mandate. Second, giving people more freedoms has never been an impediment to progress and a better world,” answered Senator Antoine.

“The mandate does not limit our freedoms. You can still vote white, or you can wait a couple of hours without being connected. It won’t kill you to walk around a park and see the sun, the real sun from time to time...”

Silence engulfed the immersion arena, and all attendees, especially the youth were stunned.

“So, you do believe that immersion is not good for us. That it is NOT a good tool that brought all these advancements in e-learning, telemedicine, and myriad other fields. You are an anti-progress and anti-youth candidate!” answered Senator Antoine.

It was the exact answer that Sara prepared many weeks ago for just an opportunity like this. Her research has shown that if the opposing candidate lost the youth vote, his chance dropped to below 20%. And he just did that.

“No, no I did not mean that. This is not what I meant!” Senator Ahmad's voice drowned among the angry boos.

Not only did Senator Antoine win his seat, but his campaign to remove the mandate picked up steam and soon the popular pressure was such that the Senate had to vote to hold a popular referendum. The president signed the decree and election day was scheduled in one month.

Sara thought her life was a blur, but in that month she no longer knew if it was day, night, or a Sunday or a Monday. She spent countless hours immersed in the best suits, jumping from circle to circle, from virtual town hall, to rally, to a one million avatar march down a virtual road mimicking Martyr square and reaching parliament. Most of her time was spent focusing on the youth as they held the dividing vote. If she could move a portion of them to the YES side, she was convinced that she would win. The older generation were set in their mind, considering that they still remembered how politics were before the mandate. Her only anchor was Zeina's steady analysis and constant insights.

Then it was *E-day*.

It was morning and Sara was still at H.Q., jumping from time zone to another, pushing for the last few votes, hoping. The clock struck 6:00 am, and her network access was frozen. She smiled with a vengeance.

“This is the last time you impose upon my freedom of access,” she mumbled.

“Hi, Mimi!”

“Hi, Miss Sara. I guess I don't have to tell you that today is election day, and on E-day, all your communications are blocked until you vote, or until midnight.”

“You didn't but you kinda told me,” Sara answered laughing.

“You know I'm obliged to say that.”

“Yup. But not anymore. Let us claw back our freedom”

With that she opened the election prompt and viciously voted YES to the question “Are you in favor of removing the mandate block on access on E-day?”

The wait was atrocious. Although she had voted, the system did not allow any partial results to be announced before midnight. It was ironic, as if she hadn't voted and was still waiting for the time she was allowed back online to interact with the world.

Midnight.

A prompt took over her communicator.

"The mandate is partly lifted. The YES vote won by 50.38% to 49.62%"

"YESSSSSSSS. VICTORY!" she screamed, she ran into Zeina's office and embraced her.

"We made it Zeina, we WON!"

The two were engulfed with passion and joy that she rarely felt before. They have changed the world, and for the better.

The rest as they say was history. She slept like a dead person for a couple of days. Then took a fully paid first class Real Life vacation with Zeina to one of the few remaining islands in the Pacific. And she came back to receive the full honors of the Senator and the YES team, and was awarded with a very substantial bonus.

She made it, and the Senator asked her to remain as he was thinking of running for President. She was interested, and she sat down with him to further discuss it.

"Look Sara. I want to continue what we started. And I need you to run my campaign for president."

"What is your top issue? Let's tackle climate change and reversing the many ravages of the past decades. You know during my vacation I had to go through several islands that have been utterly devastated. They lost more than ..."

"Sure," the Senator answered. "But there are more important issues. Let us start setting up the campaign and then after a few surveys and data collection we can decide on a few popular topics for the campaign."

"Great, I will start working on it." Sara enthusiastically responded.

Sara immediately called Zeina and told her the good news. Strangely Zeina was not as enthusiastic as she thought she would be.

"I did tell you before, but Sara I don't really like the Senator. He was with us on the Lifting of the Mandate, but I don't think we share much of his ideas and political stance!"

"I see. Look you may be right, considering that you have been working on his full background. But look, it's good money and I will make sure to start asking him about his political agenda once the campaign is up and running. Ok?"

"Sure." Zeina half answered.

Weeks passed by and Sara and Zeina's efforts were bearing fruit; the Senator's campaign and the supporting team were up and running. But a slight hesitation started nagging her, strengthened by Zeina's analysis of the Senator's new campaign slogans. Indeed, the Senator

has started using new talking points that weren't prepared by her, that were a little bit too extreme for their taste.

She asked for a meeting and sat down with the Senator virtually, his Chief of Staff thought it was better for Sara to have her own small office off in the Mountains.

"So Sara I heard you had some worries about the new direction of the campaign?" the Senator asked?

"Yes, I feel we are veering off the messages that matter more for the youth. What happened to tackling climate change and a better educational system?" Sara answered.

"As I told Sara. There are many important issues to tackle, and my team has chosen those that are the most important to my supporters. You know we cannot rely on the youth alone, they keep changing their minds and are seldom interested in politics."

"That is why we need to bring up and discuss topics that interest them. like we did with the mandate change" Sara said.

"True. We have just the topic that we could use to rally a large base around. And I will need your help in that," the Senator explained.

"You see Sara," the Senator added, "to really change our country to the better we started with lifting the mandate. We need to keep working on that issue. Voting is a serious issue. It should be left to fickle and silly youngsters that keep changing their minds and are distressed in politics. If you want to vote you should prove that you are willing to make the effort. I propose we make it harder to vote. Thus, anyone who can't be really bothered would be unable to vote, or at least will have to wait for a long time to vote. This is how we can make sure that we can easily win. I even think a return to physical voting with a long wait is better. At least we can limit fraud and better control the process?"

Sara couldn't breathe. "wh... what? But it was the youth vote that gave us the victory to change the mandate and your election?"

"Of course, of course. But you know as well as I do, they have too many crazy ideas, and they are too progressive for our society. You know how the older population thinks. We can't let inexperienced, fickle youth have a say in our lives and the ability to change our traditions?"

Sara was getting angry. "You can keep your traditions and way of life. No one is limiting you. But that is not what you are really saying, are you?"

"You were always insightful Sara. Indeed, I am saying that some traditions, some ways of living should have the upper hand, they are the proper way to live, and we must all accept that! They cannot and should not be changed. Everyone should follow them and abide by their commandments!"

"You lying piece of shit! You convinced the youth to vote for Yes and now you are robbing them of their right to vote."

"Careful. I like you but you need to know your limits. I am not robbing anyone of their rights. If they want to vote they need to make the effort. Now go cool down and think carefully about your next answer."

"No thank you."

Sara left fuming, and immediately called Zeina, apologizing.

"Let's resign and find something better to do with our lives."

She fell into a depressive phase. Sara stopped most of her communication and mulled her situation. If it wasn't for Zeina, Sara would never have gotten better. Slowly she put everything behind her and got back to her old job, mixing commercials, surveys, and data. And life continued.

It was the presidential election.

Senator Antoine was running against a moderate left of center candidate. She hated the Senator but did not really like the other candidate. So, when she woke up she sighed and picked up her communicator, resigned to vote for the least of the two evils, so she can just communicate with her friend. Then she smiled and remembered that because of her 'plan' she was free to do as she pleased. Thus, she started reading the news and vowed to vote later that day. She went to a barbeque in the Chouf Mega natural reserve with her family, and then went out with Zeina and her friends in the new Cedar floating district off the Jounieh coast. Totally forgetting to vote. At one point the issue was raised during the night out, and most of her friends declared that they still haven't voted. Feeling embarrassed she did not ask them to vote, considering it was her conviction that everyone should be free to vote. So she didn't encourage anyone, and just hid in the bathroom for a few minutes and voted with a few minutes to spare.

At midnight the results came out and Senator Antoine won with 52% of the votes. However, she was utterly surprised by the participation rate that barely reached 78%!

Months passed, and several by-elections came by. She was too busy and did not bother to search for and then click on the voting link, especially when the newly elected President Antoine had asked the election committee not to place the small prompt on the bottom of people's communicators or even remind them throughout E-day. His slogan was "If you want to vote you need to make the effort!"

During the next presidential election, Sara was furious with the many changes and decisions President Antoine was making, so she started campaigning for his competitor. Once more she was able to influence many different friends and circles, with Zeina's insightful analysis to guide her.

With fire in her heart she woke up at 6 am on E-day and asked her Virtual assistant to bring up the voting link, she wanted to vote Antoine out!

"Sorry Miss Sara, but according to Presidential Decree 19245 passed at 5:59 am those who skipped voting in the last three elections can no longer vote unless they register and vote in person in the city of their birth."

"What? How do I register and when is the train leaving for Tripoli?"

“Sorry Miss Sara, but you need to have three references from citizens who did not skip any previous votes, then send the reference to be double checked, in person, by a judge. And there are no open judges appointments before 11:45 pm.”

“I'm sure I can get the three references, Zeina never missed an election and neither did Ziad and my parents. But even if I get to the judge and finish within 5 minutes, I will be unable to take the train and arrive in Tripoli on time to vote! This is outrageous! This was done on purpose. Like the Senator said, making it harder to vote. He is robbing me of my freedom to vote! How did we get to this point, how did we let him do ...”

And then she stopped talking, feeling overwhelming guilt...

Darkness threatened to overcome her... and she felt lost and frightened. Her breathing became ragged and started panicking.

“Miss Sara,” Mimi urgently said. “Please calm down. Your heart rate is spiking. Just listen to my voice and breathe deeply,” she urged her.

Slowly Sara regained her composure and once more anger filled her.

“Mimi, please call Zeina.”

“Of course, Miss Sara, calling Zeina.”

“Hi, Zeina.”

“Hi, Sara.”

“I have a plan!”

The END