A RESEARCH AGENDA FOR THE EFFECTS OF ONLINE POLITICAL ADVERTISING: SURVEYING CAMPAIGN PRACTICE, 2000-2012

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Abstract:

While campaign expenditures on online advertising pale in comparison to broadcast advertising, it is a growing area of investment. Through interviews with practitioners and a survey of journalistic accounts, this paper traces the development of online political advertising over four presidential election cycles (2000-2012). This paper shows how each electoral cycle has brought about new techniques of online advertising. In 2000, campaigns purchased banner advertisements on sites such as AOL.com. In 2004, campaigns began to engage in search engine advertising and piloted much of the data-driven practice of targeting and measuring returns on investment that is standard today. In 2008, the Obama campaign pioneered more sophisticated forms of online advertising that went beyond fundraising appeals, developing an in-house program coordinated with fundraising, field, and communications goals. In 2012, campaigns have begun integrating online data with voter files, expanding their ability to target communications based on models of voter attitudes and behavior. We present this empirical history alongside a comprehensive review of the literature on online political advertising to outline a scholarly research agenda grounded in the actual contexts of campaign practice.

Political communication in online campaigning has undergone a dramatic evolution since the earliest candidate webpages. In the 1990s, campaigns built webpages that scholars refer to as "brochureware," or simple html versions of campaign literature (Foot & Schneider, 2006). Given these largely static, information-oriented sites, scholars focused on the deliberative potentials of online political communication, finding that it increased voter engagement and information seeking (Delli Carpini, 2000; Warnick, 2001; Stromer-Galley, 2003; Foot & Schneider, 2002), improved attitudes toward the candidates (Kaid, 2003), and decreased political cynicism overall (Tedesco & Kaid, 2000; Corrado & Firestone, 1996).

A second wave of studies noted that campaigns were increasingly oriented towards engaging supporters, not undecided voters, and generally adopted the stance that the Internet reinforced extant political power (Margolis & Resnick, 2000). Scholars found that candidates' online activities were increasingly aimed at attracting those who already had strong preferences, rather than drawing in new voters and exposing them to information about the candidates (Bimber & Davis, 2003; Foot & Schneider, 2006; Howard, 2005; Norris & Curtice, 2006). Scholars noted that the psychology of voters reinforced these campaign practices. Iyengar, Hahn, Krosnick, and Walker (2008) argued that the wealth of media sources grants voters the ability to selectively expose themselves to political communication. Based on their preferences, voters can avoid news about campaigns or tune in 24 hours a day. They can gather a wealth of perspectives on issues, or they can limit their information exposure to only partisan sources they agree with.

As Bennett and Iyengar (2008, pp. 709) argue in their seminal overview of the history of political communication research, scholars need to pay "greater attention to the underlying social and technological context in models of communication processes and their effects so that research findings become more interpretable, cumulative, and socially significant." Taking up this call, in the pages that follow we strive to make both an empirical contribution to and outline a research agenda for an area of campaign practice that has become a significant new focus for candidates: online political advertising. As we show in the pages that follow, beginning with foundational work of the Obama campaign in 2008 and continuing through the 2012 cycle, candidates have increasingly invested in online political advertising and the sophisticated databases and voter modeling techniques that make it possible. Despite this, to-date scholars have made only initial inquiries into this area of campaign practice, with much of the existing literature focusing on candidates' websites more generally, rather than online advertising.

In this article, we have the dual aim of documenting the emerging *practices* of online political advertising and outlining an agenda for studying its potential *effects*. This paper proceeds in four parts. We begin by reviewing the literature on online political advertising and then detail the methods for this study. We then provide an empirical look at the history of online political advertising over the last decade. We conclude by outlining a research agenda that is grounded in the actual sociotechnical contexts of online political advertising.

Literature Review

As the technologies used by political campaigns evolved over the past decade, the lines around what constitutes an online "advertisement" have continually shifted. While scholars such as Ridout, Fowler, & Bransetter (2010, pp. 3) argue for conceptualizing online advertising broadly to encompass all videos that make an attempt to persuade and that are produced and edited, this definition is not analytically useful given real differences between genres of campaign-produced content.

For the purposes of this paper, we define online political advertising as that which 1) campaigns or other political actors produce as discrete components of wider strategic communications efforts, 2) involves systematically evaluating progress towards defined goals through data, 3) is conducted by a group of specialists recognized as such by their peers. This definition has three central advantages over previous conceptions of online advertising. First, it accounts for the fact that campaigns and other political actors do not produce advertising for simply expressive ends. This narrower definition better captures the actual contexts within which campaigns produce online advertising in pursuit of electoral goals. Second, it encompasses a fundamental, distinctive aspect of online advertising: the ability to track the effectiveness of ads towards meeting strategic goals in real time. Third, this definition captures how campaigns themselves organize the production of online political advertisements. The staffers, consultants, and firms who handle online advertising are increasingly different from those who design websites or write candidate blogs, and both see themselves and are recognized by others as being involved in a specialized campaign practice (AUTHOR, 2012a).

This narrower definition has the effect of defining online political advertising in more traditional ways, encompassing paid online display and video advertisements, but excluding candidates' websites and email communications as well as user-generated YouTube videos. Campaigns view these things as distinct genres of new media campaign work, with qualitatively different practices around the production, delivery, and evaluation of online advertising.

There is also considerable confusion in the literature around the terminology scholars use in conjunction with online advertising. We follow AUTHOR (2012a) in adopting the prevailing ways that practitioners speak of their work for the sake of both clarity and correspondence to the contexts of campaigns. In this article, *targeting* refers to the direct or indirect transmission of specific communications to individuals or groups identified in advance, often through forms of voter modeling detailed below. *Tailoring* refers to the content of these communications, which campaigners craft to appeal to voters based on their pre-identified interests, affiliations, or demographics.[1]

In the remainder of this section, we discuss three conceptual areas that scholars have oriented themselves around in empirical research on online advertising: content, interactivity, and exposure.

Content

Similar to the research on political television advertising, much of the research on online political advertising has focused on how the content of online political ads affects

attitudes toward candidates – especially negative versus positive ads, fear appeals, and emotional versus informational ads (see Johnston & Kaid, 2002).

To-date, much work on online political advertising is descriptive in documenting the proportion of positive, negative and contrastive content and comparing these findings with work on traditional television advertising. Cornfield (2004) found that in the 2004 election, the content of online ads was mostly either positive or comparative. Similar to television advertising, political parties or outside groups, not candidates themselves, created the few negative ads of the cycle (West 2010). Scholars noted that during the 2008 presidential election online advertising began to include sharper negative attacks (Cornfield & Kaye, 2009). One reason is because nearly 60% of the overall primary and general election television advertising during the 2008 cycle was negative, and the candidates placed nearly all of these ads online (West, 2010). Ridout, Fowler and Bransetter (2012) found that negative ads accounted for 1/3 of online political advertising content on YouTube. Even more, these ads are popular, garnering over half of the viewership for political videos on the site (ibid.).

Interactivity

Campaigns routinely move all of their advertising content across platforms, not just negative ads. Most, if not all, of the ads from the Obama and McCain campaigns in 2008 were available offline and online, either on the candidates' websites (West 2010), or on blogs and video viewing sites such as YouTube and Hulu.com (Cornfield & Kaye, 2009). Political advertising has become its own genre of videos on YouTube, with video

spots being posted by candidates and political parties, as well as by citizens and less-formalized civil society groups (Thorson, Ekdale, Borah, Namkoong, & Shah, 2010).

A number of scholars have found differential effects of political advertisements across mediums given the interactive affordances of the Internet. Kaid (2003) found that transferring a television ad to the Internet can result in different effects given opportunities for outside information-seeking (see also Kaid & Postelnicu, 2005). Scholars have found that viewing political advertising on YouTube led to increased knowledge of candidate issue positions, even when controlling for education, overall news media use, and interest in the election (Winneg, Hardy, & Jamieson, 2010). Although, Baumgartner & Morris (2010) found that viewing political messages on new platforms such as YouTube and social networking sites like Facebook does not increase political participation compared to traditional media.

Campaigns themselves have sought to leverage the interactive affordances of online media, and scholars have looked at how this affects voters' attitudes and behaviors. A number of scholars have noted that new forms of online political advertising go beyond the early online banner ads that contained content that was static, mostly generic, and largely just featured slogans, not unlike billboard advertising or bumper stickers (Cornfield, 2004; Cornfield & Kaye, 2009). In 2004, campaigns began to make calls-to-action using online political advertising. Kerry campaign and Democratic Party ran ads to spur online fundraising, while the Bush campaign and Republican Party focused on volunteer recruitment and persuasion (Cornfield & Kaye, 2009). During 2008, many online ads – especially those of Obama and Romney – focused on fundraising and

encouraging voters to attend campaign events (Kaye 2007; Cornfield & Kaye, 2009).

McCain's ads of the cycle promoted online petitions and surveys to help the campaign

gather information about potential supporters.

Exposure

There have been few studies about selective exposure in voters seeking out online

advertising (Klotz, 2009). The larger concern among scholars is campaigns using new

data-based online advertising practices to *selectively expose* targeted segments of the

electorate to tailored communications designed to appeal to them. These practices are not

new. Campaigns have long used different mass mediums, such as broadcast and cable

television and radio, to deliver select messages to groups based on geographic location

and audience demographic and psychographic information (such as profiles of cable

channel viewing audiences.) Direct mail, phone calls, and door-to-door canvassing entail

more fine-grained, and increasingly individualized, targeting through commercial

marketing data coupled with other public and party data sources that enable political

actors to infer voters' political preferences and likelihood to vote (Armstrong, 1988;

Nielsen, 2012; Howard, 2003; 2006; Owen, 2011; Overby & Barth, 2006).

These practices are amplified online. The availability of user data on the Internet

means that campaigns can now both more finely target voters and tailor communications

on the basis of behavioral information such as through tracking the websites that users

visit or links and banner ads they click on (Howard, 2003; 2006; AUTHOR, 2012a;

Nielsen, 2012). This influx of targeting communications to specific individuals or groups

and tailoring messages to their individual preferences and behaviors – variously and confusingly referred to by scholars as narrowcasting, microtargeting, customization, hypermedia, or personalization – changes the ways campaigns produce political advertisements as well as the ways consumers interact with these ads (Howard, 2003; 2006; Owen, 2011). These targeting practices have been consistently evolving since campaigns began to go online, as advances in technology enable campaigns to deliver information to individuals with greater ease, lower costs, and greater accuracy (Bennett, 2008; Bennett & Mannheim, 2006; Gueorguieva, 2007; Johnson, 2011).

The promulgation of these tactics has become a cause of concern for many scholars, who worry that highly targeted political communications will limit democratic debate (Bennett & Mannheim, 2006; Bennett, 2008), lead to further selective exposure and polarization (Owen, 2011), or erode individuals' privacy and effect the competitiveness of elections (AUTHOR & Howard, 2010). While these are certainly valid concerns, to-date there are large gaps in scholarly knowledge about the industry and practices of online advertising.

And yet, despite this body of work, there is still a dearth of knowledge about the actual practices of targeting voters and tailoring advertising communication to them. Research designs involving fieldwork inside campaigns and interviews with practitioners is rare, and Howard's research for *New Media Campaigns and the Managed Citizen,* the most extensive empirical study to-date, was conducted over a decade ago before the 2004 presidential cycle.

Methods

This article grows out of a larger book project of the first author (AUTHOR, 2012a) that chronicles the history of the uptake of new media in Democratic political campaigning over the last decade.

The data presented here is drawn from interviews with individuals conducting the online political advertising for campaigns, primarily those of Democratic candidates, identified through Federal Election Commission filings, organizational records, and snowball sampling. The first author conducted interviews with individuals active in online advertising for Al Gore's campaign in 2000 and the Howard Dean and John Kerry campaigns during the 2004 cycle. In addition, the author conducted interviews with the 2008 Obama campaign's Director of Internet Advertising, Director of Analytics, and Director of the New Media Division. In addition a number of individuals who provided a range of technology, data, and consulting services to the campaign, including Blue State Digital and Voter Activation Network, were interviewed. This included Michael Bassik, who played a central role in online advertising for the party's candidates and causes since 2000.

Interviews were open-ended, semi-structured, and lasted between one and four hours, with the average interview being just over two hours. Participants could declare any statement in their interviews "not for attribution" (i.e.: directly quoted but anonymous), "on background" (i.e.: not directly quoted), or "off the record" (i.e.: not to be reported) at their discretion. Interviews were conducted in person, on the telephone, and through Internet services such as Skype.

While acknowledging the limits of conducting research on campaigns during election cycles, when there is much hype among consultants to build their reputations and businesses, to bring this history up-to-date we conducted a comprehensive survey and analysis of journalistic articles on online advertising during the 2012 campaign cycle.

Results

Online advertising was at a nascent stage in 2000. There was no online advertising industry specializing in politics, and the campaigns of the cycle were generally limited to running banner ads on sites such as AOL. In particular, AOL was the focus of online advertising efforts during the cycle, given that the firm produced an online election guide (with content from Time Warner) that was the most trafficked site for news and politics about the campaign according to industry sources.

The 2004 Cycle

The 2004 cycle ushered in a number of innovations in online advertising. The Howard Dean campaign, the source of much innovation during the cycle, made initial forays into online search and banner advertisements using the interactive, video, and graphical platform Flash, and it generated backend data metrics tracking the effectiveness of ads. A consultant to the Dean campaign and prominent progressive blogger, Jerome Armstrong, received a $75,000 budget for the campaign's online advertising program, and he worked with the Democratic online advertising consultant Michael Bassik. The campaign ran large banner Flash advertisements on news sites to drive traffic to

DeanforAmerica.com that were timed to events, such as when Dean made the covers of

Newsweek and *Time* magazines in August 2003. The campaign also developed scripts to

track how many people coming to the Dean campaign's website from the online

advertisements made financial contributions.

The Dean campaign also put together a Google advertising program. Armstrong

(personal communication, November 21, 2008) recalls that at the time Google seemingly

did not have a set policy towards political ads:

> We actually wound up in a big conflict with Google. They didn't like that we
> were sending links to our pages that were critical of Bush, and so in August or
> early September they turned off our Google advertising, and they said 'you
> can't have these pages that are critical of Bush and you can't be sending links
> to them so we are going to turn off your advertising until you clean up your
> website,' which seemed bizarre to me. I tried to explain to them this is
> politics .... and we went for actually weeks with nothing, and finally I
> mentioned it to one of the communications people on the campaign where
> they said 'you got to be kidding me'.... and so they basically sent out a letter
> to Google that said if you don't turn them on immediately we are going to
> send out a press release, and we got it turned on within 12 hours right after
> that. (Armstrong, personal communication, November 21, 2008.)

During the general election, the Kerry campaign developed the most extensive

online advertising program in Democratic politics with the help of MSHC Partners, then

the largest direct mail firm in the country. MSHC noticed during the primaries that young

people were not opening their mail, and turned to the Internet as a potential solution to

this problem. In February 2004, the firm hired Bassik to found the Interactive Marketing

division of MSHC. Bassik pitched the heads of Kerry's online efforts, and the campaign

hired MSHC to run an online advertising campaign. According to Bassik (personal

communication, May 9, 2011), the campaign's instructions were simple: "In terms of our

mandate it was, 'we don't care what the ads say as long as these ads generate a return on investment.'" For the Kerry campaign, "the Internet existed in a vacuum and was only useful as a fundraising medium" (ibid.)

The contract with the Kerry campaign provided Bassik with the opportunity to expand the interactive marketing team at MSHC beyond himself and develop the first dedicated online political advertising team in Democratic politics. This team ended up developing over 100 different ads for the campaign, with the chief goal of fundraising. The campaign tested multiple ads in different venues and evaluated returns in real time through user behavioral data. For example, Bassik's team developed online advertisements that varied slightly in content and size and ran these ads simultaneously on different news websites, in different sections (such as CNN Politics versus CNN Money), with different placement on these pages to see which combinations of concept, size, site, placement, and section performed the best in real time. The metrics for the performance of these ads were impressions, click-throughs, and donations. He also collected data on the average donation and measured the "latent donation" performance of each ad. This entailed analyzing when a person saw a specific ad (in terms of concept, size, site, placement, and section) and when they made a donation on the Kerry site, which could be days apart. The campaign then used this data on performance to guide its future ad buys.

MSHC also convinced the Kerry campaign to engage in some persuasion advertising. Bassik made online advertising buys on all the major national news sites and on sites in sixteen battleground states for a 24-hour period spanning the evening of the

last presidential debate and the following day. On the home pages of these sites, visitors saw a picture of Kerry at the debate podium and the tagline "Ready to lead." Clicking on the ad opened a new page that solicited a donation and urged individuals to vote in the online polls hosted by news organizations asking whom won the debate. The ads both made money and drove thousands to participate in these online polls. Meanwhile, in persuasion terms, MSHC commissioned an internal study of these ads and found that those exposed to the ads were more likely to believe that Kerry had won the debate.

The 2008 Obama Campaign

To drive traffic to BarackObama.com with the goal of garnering funds and volunteers, the campaign's new media division developed an extensive online advertising program. In contrast with the Kerry campaign, the Obama campaign decided that the approximately $8 million online advertising program would be handled in-house, which meant that staffers produced all of the campaign's ads and negotiated their placement through advertising networks, which saved the campaign money. During the primaries, Michael Organ, former co-founder of the Internet and database marketing company Mosaic, served as the full-time director of Internet advertising. During the general election, Andrew Bleeker took over this role. Bleeker had served in a similar position for the Hillary Clinton campaign and had also worked for the Kerry campaign and MSHC Interactive after the 2004 general election.

The Obama campaign had three primary objectives for its online advertising. The first was to build a robust supporter base. The second was voter mobilization. The final objective was persuasion, which accounted for the majority of the campaign's online

advertising expenditures. Staffers measured their progress towards meeting these objectives by clearly specifying the outcomes they desired in each area. With respect to building the supporter base, the campaign sought to use advertising to increase sign-ups to the campaign's email list, drive traffic to the website, and garner donations. Mobilization entailed using online ads for voter registration, early voting, polling and caucus location look-ups, get-out-the-vote operations, and volunteer recruitment for targeted demographic groups and individuals. Persuasion entailed using online ads to expose voters modeled as undecided to targeted issue advertising and drive traffic to applications designed to appeal to undecided voters, such as the "tax cut calculator" that enabled individuals to calculate how much money they would save under Obama's proposed plan.

Online advertising is a "closed loop"; staffers instantly could judge an ad's effectiveness by viewing data on click-throughs. Tracking user behavior in real time enabled staffers to continuously measure these outcomes and calculate returns on investment (ROI) for all the campaign's online advertising. Based on this data, the campaign's online advertisers developed a working "social-psychology of browsing" to underlay their practice – crafting appeals, testing graphics, making allocative resource decisions, and reformulating goals based on user actions.

Online mobilization advertising was particularly challenging given the need to target groups and individuals by state for electoral purposes. To do so, new media staffers closely collaborated with the field division, which provided the funding for online advertising given that its leadership believed that it was more cost effective and had

greater reach for some key electoral goals, such as registering voters, than hiring field staffers. Staffers used online advertising to capture email addresses, recruit volunteers, register voters, provide supporters with information on polling locations, and turn them out on election day.

The key to all of these activities was mobilizing only those individuals likely to be supporting Obama. A detailed look at the data infrastructure and analytic practices of modeling voters is beyond the scope of this paper (for further details, see Nielsen, 2012). However, in brief, the campaign's modeling firm Strategic Telemetry began its work by taking a poll of a random, representative sample of the electorate. Based on which candidates these polled voters supported, the firm then worked backwards to build models based on the characteristics that Obama supporters and undecideds had in common. The campaign's data consultants then generated a composite score of likely support for Obama on a 0–100 scale for every member of the electorate by layering these models onto the electorate using voter file data. The core of these voter files is public data collected from local, state, and federal records, including information such as party registration, voting history, political donations, vehicle registration, and real estate records. This data is supplemented with commercial information such as magazine subscription records, credit histories, and even grocery "club-card" purchases. These databases also contain the historical record of canvass contacts across electoral cycles. The campaign's data consultants then continually polled and incorporated the results of field canvasses to test the accuracy of and update the campaign's models.

This approach to voter modeling helped the campaign to better identify its

supporters – and those leaning in the candidate's direction – in order to target its

fieldwork. In the context of online advertising, new media staffers used these models to

identify advertising targets in each battleground state. Online advertising was allocated

toward sites popular with young, African American, and Latino voters. Staffers also used

the geo-location targeting made possible by IP addresses to display ads to individuals

residing in areas with high concentrations of Democratic voters or other favorable

demographics. The campaign also ran targeted advertising to voter groups and

individuals through purchased America Online and Yahoo user data. As Michael Bassik

(personal communication, May 9, 2011) describes the work of one of Obama's data

providers, the commercial firm Catalist:

> In 2008 Yahoo! partnered with Catalist to do a merge of the Catalist data
> and the Yahoo! data, so that individual organizations could advertise just
> to match segments and 'look-a-like' segments. For example, say Yahoo!
> has a list of 100,000 people and Catalist has a list of 100,000 people, and
> they find 20,000 people in common. Yahoo! then also finds other people
> within their 'network group' that has the same sort of behavior and tries to
> get a match, so that is the 'look-a-like' audience. And then organizations
> were invited through this relationship between Catalist and Yahoo! to
> advertise just for Democrats, just to Republicans, just to independents that
> type of thing. Yahoo! provided data back to an independent third party
> organization in terms of who saw the ads personally, which ads they saw,
> who clicked, and then they did phone polling to identify whether or not
> exposure to the ads moved perceptions.

In addition, Facebook was a new advertising vehicle. The commercial social

networking service provided a wealth of new ways to target groups of voters. Facebook

ads were based on a "cost-per-click" model, where the campaign only pays when an

individual sees an ad and actually clicks on it. The campaign targeted advertising on the

site based on a host of different characteristics revealed on voters' Facebook profile

pages, from political persuasion and religion to hobbies.

To track the effectiveness of the mobilization advertising campaigns, staffers tracked the ROIs for particular ads over time, such as thirty or sixty days, and for a range of actions. Looking at these ROIs enabled staffers to find optimal content and placement and follow the performance of ads over time for a range of possible actions. Staffers looked at the effectiveness of ads on many levels, such as whether individuals responding to ads to look up their polling place also donated to the campaign. For example, if an individual clicked on an ad and signed up for the email list, staffers followed their actions to see if they subsequently volunteered, donated, or hosted an event. Staffers then used this information to predict how many more sign-ups or polling place look-ups would happen with each additional dollar invested in advertising. This shaped how the campaign allocated its funds. Joe Rospars (personal communication, June 25, 2010), the director of the new media division, cites how the campaign knew:

> whether our online ad resulted in that person voting absentee or requesting a ballot, and then we also know if that person stays on the e-mail list and winds up donating or goes on to a volunteer activity. So we can measure our ROI for the ad and make all sorts of choices about where to run online ads and how to deal with our budget, through lots of very complicated assessments of our return on investment financially and from a volunteer perspective.

Organizational priorities, in turn, shaped what counted as "maximizing returns" from online advertising. In the context of fundraising-related advertisements, sometimes the campaign was more than willing to only get back an estimated fifty cents on the dollar for every ad that it ran. This was the case if staffers knew that the ad reached people the campaign could not contact through its other outreach efforts, or if the

campaign was prioritizing signups to the email list over financial contributions at that time. Importantly, though, the new media division always made these decisions based on analysis of data. All of which meant that the online advertisers knew what their work accomplished and took a great point of pride in their conviction that they spent the campaign's money well. Division staffers, for instance, often cited how more people looked up their polling place online during the general election than provided the margin of Obama's victory.

The 2012 Presidential Cycle

While it is difficult to have an accurate picture of what is taking shape during an in-progress campaign with closely guarded secrets and extravagant claims advanced by consultancies looking to gain clients, it is clear that campaigns on both sides of the aisle are making significant investments in online advertising. Campaigns are expected to spend about 10 percent of their total advertising budgets on the web (Peters 2012). The Romney campaign spent $2.45 million on online ads in 2011 (Blumenthal, 2012). By March 2012 the Obama campaign and the DNC had spent $13 million on online ads, and the campaign is on pace to spend $35 million (Kaye, 2012a).

Several trends distinguish online political advertising in 2012 from that of previous cycles. These include the increased sophistication of voter targeting, and a rise in the use of social media, online video, and mobile technologies by the 2012 campaigns.

The biggest change in online political advertising is the increasing sophistication of voter targeting – especially the ability to match the online and offline identities of

voters. Candidates are increasingly matching voter files with data from commercial

advertising firms who track the online behavior of consumers. This means that campaigns

can now tailor advertising to voters based on the modeling detailed above and individual

characteristics, for example Democrats who voted in the last election, Latinos living in

swing states (Kaye, 2012b), or voters who purchased certain luxury goods (Delany, 2012)

as well as voters' projected likelihood to support specific candidates. Campaigns identify

and deliver advertising to voters as they browse the web using cookies (Issenberg, 2012).

Campaigns have also expanded the matching practices detailed above, where the

browsing histories of known supporters of a candidate or political party are used to find

other computer users with similar browsing behaviors whose information may not

already be part of the voter file. Campaigns look at what voters read online, what content

they share, and where they leave comments to find other users like them; the idea being

that similar *browsing* behaviors may reflect similar *voting* behaviors. During the

primaries, for instance, the Romney campaign used online survey data to identify voters

in Wisconsin who were politically conservative but not yet convinced to vote for

Romney, and they narrowed this universe down to a specific target (18-year-old,

Republican-leaning, dissatisfied with Obama). They then used these people's browsing

histories to find others with similar web histories to target (Peters, 2012).

Importantly, contrary to much campaign practice that is premised upon

identifiable voter contacts, it appears that campaigns have followed the self-regulatory

norms of commercial advertisers in detaching users' personally identifiable information

(PII) from their online behavior (Issenberg, 2012). According to journalist Sasha

Issenberg (2012), the Obama and Romney campaigns say they are not looking at individual-level results regarding which voters actually viewed ads online and which did not. Instead, they receive aggregated results, often broken down demographically, showing how many ads were served and how many unique voters saw and clicked through the ads.

In addition to targeting voters as they move across the web, campaigns are also spending record amounts on Facebook advertising this cycle (Kaye, 2012c), with campaigns finding that social media is often the best way to quickly reach supporters. Campaigns have increasingly used social media to serve geo-targeted local ads (based on Facebook user locations) to help drive event attendance (Shepherd, 2012). Campaign strategists also note that when a person shares campaign information, such as online video advertisements, with friends on a site like Facebook that person's endorsement adds credibility to the candidates' messages (Naylor, 2012; Peters, 2012), consistent with the literature on the persuasive effects of recommendation source (see Hass, 1981).

There has been an increased emphasis on online video ads during the 2012 election, which analysts suggest is being driven by declines in the consumption of live television (Johnson, 2012). These ads are an extension of online advertising from 2008. During that cycle, Romney was the first to use overlay advertising on selected videos that had socially conservative and family-centered keywords tagged in their audio files (Cornfield and Kaye, 2009). The advertising that overlay these videos invited users to click to watch a Romney ad on related topic. One popular format that campaigns are using in 2012 is the pre-roll video ad that works on similar premises. Video advertising

streams before and after select content on news sites and video sites such as Hulu and

YouTube. Campaigns are also using video embedded in rich media banner advertisements

(Johnson, 2012).

Campaigns are also further leveraging data to deliver their online video

advertising. During the primaries Romney campaign strategists analyzed online survey

data to find voters who were not watching live TV. The campaign then analyzed their

browsing histories and built a model to specifically target similar voters with online video

ads (Peters, 2012). The campaign then used data on how these users interacted with the

video ad to help improve future targeting and content. The campaign collects and uses

data indicating whether users watch the full video, how long they spend watching it, if

they share it with friends on Facebook and Twitter, and if they provide their email address

to the campaign or donate money.

The use of mobile technologies has also become more prominent during the 2012

electoral cycle. Although SMS marketing has been used by campaigns in the past, mobile

users resoundingly find these tactics intrusive (Leggatt, 2011). However, mobile web

advertising is an alternative the campaigns' digital teams see as offering significant

potential. Both the Romney and Bachmann campaigns used click-to-call ads during the

primaries, which allowed mobile users to call the campaign from the ad with the click of

a button. Mobile web advertising also offers advanced geo-targeting capabilities,

allowing candidates to serve ads to mobile users currently located within a certain radius

of a college campus (Caroline, 2012).

Discussion: Towards a Research Agenda

We call for a research agenda that integrates a concern for the changing practices of online advertising with the effects these messages have on individuals and the polity. To do so, scholars need to take a mixed methods approach to understanding both the production and consumption of online political advertising.

First, much more is needed on the actual production of online advertising to document and analyze the firms, campaign organizations, staffers, and tools that shape the targeting and tailoring of messages to voters. While there is a rich literature on political consulting as a profession and the types of services they provide campaigns, very few works detail the workings of campaigns from inside these organizations or from the the perspective of the consultancies that serve them. Howard's (2006) work was the most comprehensive empirical study of these firms to-date, but the industry has changed drastically since this seminal work. For one, the professionalization that much of the political consulting literature takes for granted simply does not exist at the campaign level in areas of new media practice. The new media operations of the Obama campaign were staffed by many who moonlighted in politics, on temporary hiatus from careers in commercial industry, such as the campaign's first director of Internet advertising.

More research is needed on the dynamics of how campaigns assemble knowledge and skills in domains such as online advertising. These industry-crossers could be the vehicle through which commercial industry tactics, thoroughly detailed by Turow (2011), migrate to political contexts. Individuals seem to move across the boundaries of

organizational fields, returning to industry after electoral cycles and reconvening around elections. Another unexplored dynamic is the phenomenon of former campaign staffers launching consultancies to stay in the political field after an election, such as Bleeker's founding of Bully Pulpit Interactive after the election, a firm that specializes in political online advertising. Even more, as Bleeker and numerous political advertising staffers suggested, these consultancies often have to take on a number of campaign, civil society, and commercial clients, fostering transfers in techniques, knowledge, and skills between these sectors.

Just as scholars should investigate the infrastructural resources campaigns have available to them to develop their online advertising programs, they should also be attentive to how campaigns incorporate it within their larger goals. As the above discussion suggests, much of the literature uses content analysis to descriptively code online advertising. This provides insight into general trends in online advertising, but cannot get at the complex array of organizational goals and practices behind targeting specific voters and tailoring content for them on the basis of electoral priorities. Meanwhile, while a body of work takes interactivity as its focus, scholars have generally not discovered the diversity of those 'calls-to-action' that many write about, from voter registration to donations, nor the complex metrics that go into evaluating the effectiveness of advertising. Scholars need to be attentive to the context of campaigns to discover *their* practices and how they set goals for online advertising, integrate data, target individuals and groups of voters, craft content, and test its effectiveness.

A more sensitive research agenda, for example, would look in more nuanced ways at the incremental attitudinal and behavioral changes that campaigns seek to affect. For example, campaigns seek to fashion those sympathetic to the candidate into low-cost supporters, getting them to sign up on email lists. Campaigns seek to encourage sympathetic yet disengaged people to register to vote, and use online advertising to try and persuade those already supporting candidates to increase their involvement, from making a donation to volunteering. At the same time, this suggests that many of the stronger claims for "managed politics" (Howard, 2006) overstate the potential for campaigns to control the electorate. These communicative tactics are about persuasion at the margins, not fashioning Democrats into Republicans or vice versa. Even more, as campaigns know, most voters do no click on online advertisements, and may encounter ads while consuming many different types of content, mitigating any potential for simplistically controlling the electorate. Researchers need to be as sensitive to the contexts of consumption as campaigns are.

Furthermore, understanding these processes will enable scholars to design laboratory experiments that have greater external validity with respect to the actual targeting of communication and tailoring of messages. And yet, there is a dearth of experimental scholarship on the psychological effects of highly targeted and tailored online *political* messages. While research in politics is lacking, the effects of highly personalized messages have been widely tested in other fields (see Kalyanaraman & Sundar, 2006, for a review). These studies have found that the more closely linked messages are to aspects of the self, the more persuasive they are. Studies have found that

respondents gravitate toward arguments that they generate or that match their own viewpoints (Greenwald & Albert, 1968). Health communication studies have found that tailored messages have more positive effects on attitudes and health outcomes for the target population than non-personalized communications (Rimer & Kreuter, 2006). Initial studies in the political domain suggest that targeting and tailoring may have similar effects. In a set of face morphing experiments, Bailenson, Iyengar, Yee and Collins (2008) found that voters preferred candidates high in facial similarity to themselves, even in high-profile elections, and especially with unfamiliar candidates.

While this literature suggests that online political advertising will have similar effects, scholars need to account for the stunning new capacities of campaigns to target voters and tailor communications based on an individual's political attitudes, interests, and behaviors. There are a growing number of accounts on highly tailored online political advertising in the professional and trade press (see Kaye, 2012; Delany, 2011; Pearson & O'Connell, 2011; Smith & Scultheis, 2011; Gernert, 2010; Levy, 2008), but to date scholarly research on the production of these online messages, and the messages' subsequent effects on the electorate, are few and far between – perhaps because these tactics are relatively new.

Scholars also have little understanding of how source evaluation changes when the broadcast model of traditional advertising is upended by the platforms and practices that support social sharing on sites such as YouTube and Facebook. A few recent studies have shown that campaigns are encouraging the social sharing of content, including political ads (Kaid, 2006). Based on our research, we believe that these are practices of what we call 'targeted social sharing,' the strategic attempt to make content go viral

within previously identified, electorally significant, networks. Little in known about how campaigns do this, although recent research suggests that it involves building networks for the dissemination of content and cultivating ties that can be mobilized to promote content (Author, 2012b). Even more, the effects on persuasion when voters are exposed to political ads through social ties not well known, although initial work suggests that sources online are very important (English, Sweetser, and Ancu, 2011). Even more, recent work suggests that the content and context of political advertising may change as it circulates online. Gueroguieva (2007) suggests that political candidates try to gain increased exposure for their messages through social mechanisms for little cost by posting content, including advertising, on sites such as YouTube. However, campaign managers also have a reduced level of control over the candidate's image and message, as new actors can produce and share content, reframe ads by parodying them or recreating them altogether, and circulate them to mobilize ideological opponents. Much more research is needed into how new technologies and practices of consuming political content, including advertising, changes its effects on voters.

Finally, while we do not discuss it in detail in the empirical section of this paper, we need to learn more about intra-media agenda-setting in the context of online advertising. A number of scholars have noted that campaigns often produce ads so journalists cover them (Golan, Kiousis, & McDaniel, 2005), providing them with "earned media" to get their message out. It is unclear how this works with online advertising. Sweetster, Golan, and Wanta (2008) found that the content of the Bush and Kerry 2004 advertisements posted *online* on the candidates' websites were not related to the issues the media focused on in its coverage of the two candidates. Other scholars, however, have

found that candidates' websites (Ku, Kaid, & Pfau, 2003) play a role in setting the media agenda and affecting the issues voters remember and see as important. In a study of the 2010 U.S. Senate races, Ridout et al. (2012) found that discussion of TV advertising dominated the news media agenda, but that online views of content were associated with more media coverage (although it was not clear whether the cause of this association was the media coverage or the online views). Media organizations are more likely to cover online videos if they are incorporated into candidates' campaign communications (Wallstein, 2010), and these videos are more likely to spread virally and reach the general interest press if they are promoted by both campaigns and by bloggers (Author, 2012b; Nahon, Hemsley, Walker, & Hussain, 2011).

Conclusion

Following Bennett and Iyengar's (2008) call, we believe that scholars need new interdisciplinary and mixed methodological approaches of studying the changing forms and contexts of political advertising in the digital era. In contrast to the static, one-way advertisements of the broadcast era, campaigns have developed a multiplicity of goals and tactics tied to electoral contexts given rich new sources of data and analytic techniques used to target the electorate and tailor messages. Interactive media have both lowered the cost of citizen participation and created qualitatively new forms of political activity, from online phone-banking online to promoting candidates on Twitter. Meanwhile, campaigns seek to leverage horizontal, social information flows for their strategic communications.

To-date, scholars have focused on content, interactivity, and exposure in the context of online advertising. This research approach will both need to be developed further and reconceptualized in light of continual technological and social changes. Scholars need to find new conceptual vocabularies and tools for analyzing the content of online ads, the interactive affordances of media and the organizational goals that shape them, and the proliferating avenues and new contexts for exposure to strategic communications. We suggest that one place to start is by looking closely at the work of the staffers who actually coordinate online advertising programs for campaigns - especially given how difficult it is to surmise organizational electoral goals, targeting schema, individualized information flows, and social sharing through methods such as content analysis.

Indeed, during the 2012 cycle, campaigns are developing thousands of different iterations of online advertisements with subtle variations in content based on individual attitudes, preferences, and behaviors. Campaigns have developed dozens of different forms of interactive ads tied to both electoral priorities and individuals' previous relationship with the campaign. Meanwhile, citizens are exposed (or not exposed at all) to ads according to complicated targeted schema on a host of devices, from personal computers to mobile phones. A scholarly research agenda needs to get close to the actual contexts within which citizens encounter, disseminate, and even create online political communication.

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[1] Although it is more prevalent in psychological studies on interactivity, *personalization* refers to users' own personalization of web content, such as determining political news RSS feeds. There is, of course, a considerable degree of ambiguity on the borders of these terms. Browser-based cookies deliver tailored ads based on what campaigns learned through online behavior. Read another way, often from an industry perspective, cookies enable user to personalize their information flows based on what they are interested in (Kalyanaraman & Sundar, 2006).