

Strategic Communication in a Networked Age

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In the weeks before the 2012 election, President Barack Obama's supporters using the campaign's Facebook application received messages asking them to urge select friends in key swing states to vote, register, or volunteer. An estimated 5 million voters responded positively to the requests of their friends, many of them 18- to 29-year-olds who could not be reached by phone (Judd 2012). On quick glance, it may appear that there is not much new here. The 2008 Obama campaign notably pioneered the use of social media platforms for political organizing, leveraging Facebook to mobilize and coordinate supporters for electoral ends (Kreiss 2012a). What was different in 2012 lay in the campaign asking its supporters to contact only select members of their social network. The campaign matched parts of its massive voter databases, including one managed by the Democratic Party and encompassing more than 500 points of data on every member of the electorate, to data on the social networks of its supporters on Facebook to help it contact priority voters.

This social media targeting was premised on voter modeling, which entails assigning numerical scores representing likely political attitudes and behavior to every member of the electorate. These scores are the outgrowth of an enormous proliferation of data about the electorate over the past decade and, as importantly, new analytical techniques that render data meaningful. The Obama campaign used four scores that on a scale of 1 to 100 estimated the probability of voters' likelihood of supporting Obama, turning out to vote, being persuaded to turn out, and being persuaded to support Obama on the basis of specific appeals (Beckett 2012a). The campaign and the consulting firms it hired calculated these scores by continually surveying the electorate and looking for patterns within the massive databases of political data they had access to. These modeling scores, in turn, became the basis for the entire voter-contact operation, which ranged from making "personalized" voter contacts on the doorsteps (Nielsen 2012) and through the social media accounts of voters to running advertisements on the cable television screens of swing voters (Rutenberg 2012).

Although the use of political data for electoral advantage has a long history dating back to at least the middle to late 1800s (McGerr 1986; Kazin 2007), there is both qualitatively new data and new means of using it as the basis for targeted strategic communications in contemporary campaigning. Data

lies behind the extraordinary growth in online advertising, which allows campaigns to target specific groups and even individual voters with highly tailored appeals. Data is also the foundation of the targeted outreach on social media platforms that both support widespread citizen social and symbolic participation in electoral politics and provide campaigns with new ways to subtly influence the electorate. These practices enable campaigns to create “individualized information flows” (Barnard and Kreiss 2013) to members of the electorate that are difficult, if not impossible in many cases, to open up to public scrutiny.

In this chapter, we take an in-depth look at the data practices of contemporary campaigns and the new forms of targeted communications they support, through the lens of the 2012 electoral cycle. We focus on President Obama’s reelection bid given that practitioners on both sides of the aisle cite the campaign as the most advanced application of data and analytics to strategic communications in electoral politics to date and as the standard that Republicans are currently striving to meet (Confessore 2013). We first discuss the history of political data, placing particular emphasis on the rise of the sophisticated forms of voter modeling that underpinned the 2012 electoral success of the Obama campaign. We then show how data and modeling work in online advertising and strategic communications using social media. We conclude with a discussion of the implications for democratic practice, detailing the interplay between the decentering of political communication and the ways that campaigns have adopted new means of finding and appealing to members of the electorate. The data presented in this chapter is drawn primarily from a survey and analysis of journalistic articles, as well as open-ended qualitative interviews with campaign staffers active during the 2012 cycle.

In sum, we argue that the explosion of data on the electorate has provided campaigns with new ways to control their message in a networked media environment, from targeting and tailoring online advertising to using supporters as the implements of campaign communications on platforms such as Facebook and the doorsteps of voters. Data and analysis lie at the center of all aspects of contemporary campaigning—from the voter modeling that probabilistically determines who a candidate’s supporters are and who is undecided to the continual tracking of the outcomes of voter contacts and behavior online in order to optimize messages. And yet this is far from complete professionalized control of the message of candidates such as Obama, as social media also provide unprecedented opportunities for political discourse by nonelites (Chadwick 2013). This chapter explores the contours of contemporary political communication in the context of presidential campaigning, revealing both new capacities for controlling the message and the limits to this control in an age of digital social networks.

The Long History of Big Data

Data has increasingly become central to political campaigns, but it is deeply ahistorical to posit that this change originated with the 2012 cycle, as many popular accounts suggest (Scherer 2012; Sifry 2011).¹ There is a gap in the scholarly literature as well when it comes to historical analysis of contemporary forms of mediated politics. The dominant approach to considering the effects of the Internet, and new media more generally, has failed to account for the fact that the Internet of 2012 does not look like the Internet of 2008 and even less so like the Internet of 2004 (for this argument, see Bimber, Flanagin, and Stohl 2012; Karpf 2012). Meanwhile, a body of literature compares campaigning across electoral cycles to account for technological change but offers few explanatory accounts of *why* and *how* practices and technologies change or grow more sophisticated.

Scholars need to take a historical approach to understand the particular arrangement of tools, practices, and techniques campaigns used during the 2012 cycle. Indeed, the accumulation of data by political parties, the specific systems that make this accumulation possible, the practices of analyzing and using data, and the forms of strategic communications that data supports all have a history (Kreiss 2012a). The two presidential campaigns' specific techniques and tools, and differing capacities, for gathering, storing, maintaining, and analyzing data were the product of the shifting configurations and work of different "party-networks" over the preceding decade. In recent years, scholars have reconceptualized political parties as "decentralized, nonhierarchical, fluid systems with porous boundaries among a wide array of actors" that "include interest groups, social movements, media, political consultants, and advocacy organizations, in addition to the usual suspects of elected officials, party officials, and citizen-activists" (Masket et al. 2009).

Following perspectives that conceptualize technologies as social actors (Latour 2006), we add to the party-network conceptualization technical artifacts such as the party-maintained databases candidates use.² Party-networks form a large part of the infrastructure candidates have at their disposal as they organize campaigns for office (Star 1999), although they must assemble and coordinate particular configurations of component parts effectively in order to maximize their chances for success (Nielsen 2012). In essence, party-networks are historically specific arrangements of human, organizational, technical, and knowledge resources that campaigns can draw on. Party-networks shape the background capacities campaigns have to act strategically during an electoral cycle, providing much of the technologies and staffers available for electoral runs. The advantages that Obama had over Mitt Romney in terms of campaign capacity cannot be fully explained by the differing strategies of the two campaigns, as some recent work suggests (Alter 2013), although they certainly played a role. The comparative Democratic advantage in voter data, analytic technologies, and electoral tools was built up over a decade at the level of an extended party-network. In short, the Obama campaign had better voter data, more robust databases, a deeper talent pool of technically skilled staffers, and more field-tested

tools in its party network to draw on than the Romney campaign did.

The contemporary history of data utilization for electoral purposes begins in the 1970s, when political campaigns and consultants began to take advantage of technological advances to gather and leverage data for success at the polls (Howard 2006; Sabato 1981; Whitman and Perkins 2003). Driven by Republican innovations in the 1980s, consultants began using data to target specific categories of voters and households with tailored messages using direct mail. With this early work as a foundation, the Republican Party had a strong advantage in voter data, microtargeting, and data systems through the 2004 cycle. For instance, the party developed an extensive national voter file in the early 2000s, called Voter Vault, which provided the core of its infrastructure through the middle of the decade. There is no systematic research into Republican database efforts past Voter Vault, although a number of journalistic reports suggest both that much of the party's data infrastructure is handled by third parties (Judd 2012a) and that the Romney campaign in 2012 relied on extensive financial marketing databases (Gillum 2012) and in-house data on the electorate in at least some key primary states (Issenberg 2012b).

Practitioners and scholars alike agree that the Democratic Party is now far ahead of its Republican counterpart in voter data, database technology, and the analytic practices that render information actionable. This is the result in part of massive infrastructure projects launched by Howard Dean when he became chair of the party in 2005, a position he achieved in no small part on the basis of the party's valuing of the technological prowess of his presidential campaign (Kreiss 2012a). Throughout much of the 1990s and early 2000s, the Democratic Party's voter data management was "largely a haphazard affair, coordinated mostly by state parties or the stewards of local precincts" (Kreiss and Howard 2010). As chair, Dean created the party's first national voter file and online interface system, called VoteBuilder. As a key piece of infrastructure for Democratic campaigning, VoteBuilder extended the capacity of the party and its candidates to contest elections and target the electorate. It enabled Democratic candidates for offices from state senate to president to share data across campaigns and election cycles, while ensuring that the voter file was continuously updated with quality data from voter contacts. This system was first tested during the 2006 election cycle and provided the data infrastructure for all party candidates in 2008 and for the Obama campaign and the rest of the party's candidates in 2012.

The sources of this data are varied. The data includes public data collected from local, state, and federal records that detail party registration, voting history, political donations, vehicle registration, and real estate records. Credit histories, magazine subscription lists, and even drugstore discount cards provide the commercial data that campaigns use. The parties update this data through the millions of contacts generated by campaigns and carry their databases across election cycles, offering them to campaigns at all levels of office.

Analytic firms use this data to model the electorate and to generate the various scores (which are common in consumer marketing), detailed earlier. Data only become meaningful through this modeling, which distills hundreds of data points into simpler categories of voters: likely supporters, those who are likely to be undecided, and those who are likely to support the other candidate. In addition, there are further gradations of these categories, such as modeling supporters' likelihood of turning out and undecided voters' likelihood of being persuaded. To generate scores for these categories, firms servicing the Obama campaign began by surveying random, representative samples of the electorate and then looked for correlated data points (shared demographic, psychographic, attitudinal, and behavioral characteristics, etc.) among voters in the listed categories. Voter models entail particular combinations of correlated data, which are then layered onto the voter file to generate those composite scores on a 0–100 scale for every member of the electorate.

If in 2008 Republicans were marginally behind in voter data, analytics, field campaigning, and infrastructure, the 2012 election revealed the party to be a full cycle behind the Democrats in some of these domains (Kreiss 2012b).³ This was apparent in the differing infrastructural capacities of the two parties and their candidates. In 2012, the Romney campaign launched Project ORCA, what campaign sources referred to as a “massive, state-of-the-art poll monitoring effort” (Terkel 2012). ORCA was supposed to entail thousands of volunteers across the country updating a central database as voters went to the polls so that campaign staffers could monitor returns and direct field resources efficiently toward those who had not yet voted. The system was both an organizational (Ek Dahl 2012) and technical failure (Gallagher 2012).⁴

Project ORCA was similar to the 2008 Obama campaign's Houdini system, which staffers and volunteers used briefly until it crashed (Kreiss 2012c). After the election cycle, Obama's campaign operatives systematically assessed the failures of 2008 and made considerable investments to correct for them. Former campaigners realized that data integration was a significant problem during the 2008 campaign, Project Houdini lacked the basic capacity to support thousands of simultaneous updates to its database, and the campaign lacked many tools and work practices for integrating new media and field efforts. As a result, former campaign staffers working for Organizing for America, party operatives, and a network of Democratic-affiliated firms and interest groups spent the next three years attempting to solve these problems for the reelection effort. For example, through developing and field testing new systems during the 2010 midterm elections, the campaign and party operatives fine-tuned organizational structures and technical systems (Issenberg 2012a; Madrigal 2012). All this meant that when the campaign's programmers came on board during the Republican primaries, they could focus on using technology as a “force multiplier” for ground efforts (Lohr 2012) and to overcome problems of scale (Harris 2012)—instead of engaging in basic technical development.

This change mattered given that the effort to reelect Obama occurred in a radically different electoral context than 2008. As one senior staffer on the 2012 campaign stated (personal communication with the first author, September 22, 2012), “if in 2008 enthusiasm is 100%, our organization only captured 60%. If in 2012 enthusiasm is 80%, our organization can capture 90%.” At the center of this organization was data gathering, management, and analysis, the planning and building of the infrastructure for which began early. “We are going to measure every single thing in this campaign,” campaign manager Jim Messina said after taking the job, noting that the analytics department would be five times as large as it was during the 2008 campaign (Scherer 2012). This approach to measurement extended the 2008 campaign’s development of “computational management” practices, which refers to the “delegation of managerial, allocative, messaging, and design decisions to analysis of users’ actions made visible in the form of data as they interacted with the campaign’s media” (Kreiss 2012a, 144). In 2012, the Obama campaign hired a “chief scientist” as well as dozens of software designers and developers, engineers, and scientists to work with the massive amount of available data (Judd 2012c).

All of this reveals both that data practices have a specific history and that the 2012 Obama campaign enjoyed a significant party-network advantage in terms of having data infrastructure and practices that were built up and tested during previous election cycles. For example, although it built a number of social media and other applications in-house, the Obama campaign also relied on outside vendors, such as Blue State Digital and NGP VAN, which served the 2008 campaign and the party since 2004 and had the accrued experience and robust technical systems that come from working across election cycles. In addition, the Obama reelection campaign started with the decidedly new incumbent advantage of more than 13 million email addresses it had already gathered during the previous campaign, as well as an established social media presence with millions of Facebook supporters and Twitter followers that provided ample amounts of data and messaging vehicles. Although more systematic research on the Republican Party’s history over the past decade needs to be conducted, by contrast, the Romney campaign had a much more limited set of infrastructural resources within the Republican Party to draw on.

Although various streams of voter data lay at the foundation of much of the 2012 Obama campaign and modeling shaped its electoral strategy, these aspects of the campaign were generally invisible until postelection accounts emerged (for a summary of these accounts through the eyes of a campaign staffer, see Ecker 2012). Voters experienced these aspects of the campaign directly, however, through its strategic communications. In the pages that follow, we look closely at new practices of online advertising and social media targeting, areas of campaign practice premised on extensive use of data. We focus on online advertising and social media here because they are areas of significant and growing investment, likely to become even more central areas of campaigning during future presidential

cycles.

Online Advertising

Commercial firms ran their first online advertisements in 1994 (Kaye and Medoff 2001), but digital political advertising came much later. Online political advertising was in its infancy during the 2000 cycle, being limited to banner ads on sites such as America Online (Barnard and Kreiss 2013). During the 2004 cycle, campaigns began running more interactive advertising and gathering user data to measure the effectiveness of ads, and a network of consultants specializing in online advertising and aligned with the two parties began to develop (ibid.). Both Barack Obama and John McCain devoted considerable resources to online advertising during the 2008 election, spending a combined \$22.8 million during the cycle, with the vast majority of that spending (\$16 million) coming from the Obama campaign (Stampler 2012), which is the focus of the findings presented here.

The 2008 Obama campaign had three primary objectives for its online advertising: to build a robust supporter base, to mobilize those supporters to become volunteers and donors, and to persuade undecided members of the electorate (Barnard and Kreiss 2013). These objectives were tied into electoral strategy and had associated metrics that tracked the effectiveness of ads toward meeting them. Even more, the campaign's online advertising involved tailoring different content to various targeted demographic groups and individuals on the basis of the voter modeling detailed earlier. In other words, the campaign used online advertising to send specific appeals to specific groups of people. In terms of building a robust supporter base, the metrics for success included sign-ups to the campaign's email list and online fundraising. Mobilization entailed a cluster of related advertising appeals around voter registration, early voting, polling and caucus location lookups, get-out-the-vote operations, and volunteer recruitment. The third objective, persuasion, accounted for the majority of the campaign's online advertising expenditures and involved advertising that delivered information designed to appeal to groups of individuals whom the campaign profiled as undecided. The campaign continuously measured its progress toward meeting these goals through the real-time gathering and analyzing of data about user interactions with online ads (Barnard and Kreiss 2013).

The growing emphasis on online advertising continued during the 2012 election cycle, with the two presidential campaigns combining to spend an estimated \$78 million. Again, Obama outspent his opponent by a considerable margin, devoting \$52 million toward online advertising, compared with Romney's \$26 million (Stampler 2012). Although expenditures on online advertising still pale in comparison to broadcast and cable television advertising (Miller 2008), online spending is growing far more rapidly (Bachman 2012). The online video platform Hulu, for instance, reported that the number of

political ads aired in 2012 represents a 700% increase from the past two federal elections and that 80% of its users voted in both the 2008 and 2010 elections (Blumenthal 2012).

There are a number of reasons for the growth in online advertising. For one, campaigns cite a rapid decline in the consumption of live television (Johnson 2012). In addition, as the Hulu example suggests, online platforms and commercial advertising networks have an extraordinary amount of data about users. This means that campaigns have new opportunities to deliver specific messages to specific voters, affording the targeting and tailoring of information to individuals with greater ease, lower costs, and greater accuracy (Bennett 2008; Bennett and Manheim 2006; Kreiss and Howard 2010). As the earlier discussion of the 2008 election cycle suggests, the ability to use online ads to target specific voters, to tailor messages to their preferences and behaviors, and to track their responses has made online advertising a uniquely powerful tool for strategic communications.

During the 2012 cycle, the targeting of voters and tailoring of communications took shape on multiple levels as campaigns accessed new sources of data on the electorate. Both presidential campaigns used behavioral, demographic, interest, and “look-alike” targeting (matching voters on the basis of the characteristics they share with others with known political preferences), and also matched IP addresses with party voter files, to target ads to priority voters. Extending practices from 2008, the 2012 campaigns again used this targeting to deliver online ads for the purposes of list building, mobilizing supporters to get involved, and persuading undecideds. The presidential campaigns, for instance, served ads to voters they modeled as undecided. The content of those ads included information about particular issues the campaigns believed these voters would be responsive to on the basis of polling and focus groups with similar voters. Even more, while Travis Ridout et al. (2012) show how audience fragmentation also allows for targeted mass-media advertising on cable, online advertising has qualitatively different affordances that facilitate more precise targeting and interactivity. These qualities of the medium enable campaigns to ask specific individuals and groups (designated through the modeling detailed earlier), such as unregistered likely Obama supporters, to take specific actions such as registering to vote online. Campaigns ask others, such as committed politically engaged supporters, to take actions such as donating or volunteering online.

For example, both presidential campaigns targeted communications to specific groups of voters and even individuals such as Democrats who voted in the previous election, Latinos living in swing states (Kaye 2012a), and voters who purchased certain luxury goods (Delany 2012a). They did so by targeting ads on the basis of behavioral data gleaned from users’ browsing habits as well as what is known as “voter matching,” in which the browsing histories of known supporters of a candidate or political party are used to find other computer users with similar behaviors (Beckett 2012b; Delany 2012b). Both campaigns looked at what known voters read online, what content they shared, and where

they left comments in order to find and target other users like them. The idea is that similar browsing behaviors may predict 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 then it narrowed this universe down to a specific target (18 years old, Republican leaning, dissatisfied with Obama). It then used these individuals' browsing histories to find others with similar web histories to target (Peters 2012).

The biggest change in online political advertising in 2012 was campaigns' increased ability to match the online and offline identities of voters. Campaigns (and the firms that service them) matched their voter records to the IP addresses assigned to the computers of targeted voters (Issenberg 2012b). For example, firms and campaigns on both sides of the aisle have actively matched party (and commercial-firm-maintained) voter databases to the online registration data of sites such as Yahoo!. This allows campaigns to deliver video, display, and search advertising to targeted segments of, and even individual, voters. This practice is not new, but it was much more widespread and sophisticated in 2012 than in earlier cycles. In 2008, for example, the Obama campaign took the first steps toward merging voter file data with the purchased registration data of America Online and Yahoo! (Barnard and Kreiss 2013). By 2012, however, this practice was far more expansive, with candidates matching voter files with data from an array of commercial advertising firms that track the online behavior of consumers with anywhere from 60% to 80% accuracy (Delany 2012b).

Campaigns also increased their advertising on social media, online video, and mobile platforms. The two presidential campaigns spent record amounts on Facebook advertising during the 2012 cycle (Kaye 2012c). Campaigns used Facebook and other social media to serve geotargeted ads to do things such as help increase event attendance (Shepherd 2012). Campaigns also sought to design advertisements that their supporters would share on these platforms. Strategists argued that when a person shares campaign information, such as online video advertisements, with friends on a site such as Facebook, that person's endorsement adds credibility to the campaigns' messages (Naylor 2012; Peters 2012). Campaigns also expanded video advertising during the 2012 cycle, running videos embedded in rich-media banner advertisements (Johnson 2012) and streamed before and after select content on news sites and video sites such as Hulu and YouTube (Barnard and Kreiss 2013). The Obama campaign expanded its video-game advertising during the 2012 election cycle, running ads in online games such as Scrabble, Tetris, Madden NFL 13, and Battleship. Trade reporting suggests that gamers who saw political ads were 120% more likely to react positively to the candidate and 50% more likely to consider voting for the candidate than if they encountered the ad somewhere else (Ashburn 2012). All of these online advertising practices are premised on the voter modeling detailed earlier that allows campaigns to focus on niche voters and to find them, given the fragmentation of audiences across different media

platforms. Or, as NPR put it, “campaigns that want to reach young males in Ohio might do better buying space in *Madden* than during *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*” (Yenigun 2012).

Although campaigns are clearly embracing the ability to target and tailor online advertising, there are persistent concerns that these practices might be harmful to the electoral process. For one, voters reject this widespread campaign practice. A national survey by Joseph Turow et al. (2012) revealed that 86% of Americans do not want “political advertising tailored to your interests,” which is a far higher percentage of voters than those who reject other forms of tailored advertising for products and services (61%), news articles (56%), and discounts and coupons (46%). The public is not alone in its concern. Scholars fear that microtargeting might cause campaigns to completely ignore or tune out portions of the electorate (Howard 2006). Even more, scholars and commentators have called for increased public scrutiny of targeted political advertising, including modifying Federal Election Commission regulations to make these ads visible to everyone (Peha 2012). Ironically, legislators have proposed restrictions on commercial practices routinely used in politics. As Kate Kaye notes (2012c), legislators have proposed bills to restrict commercial tracking and ad targeting; however, their campaigns routinely use these technologies.

Social Media

Aside from advertising, the 2012 campaigns used social media extensively as a tool for strategic communications with the general public, journalists, undecided voters, and supporters, as well as providing the latter with opportunities to volunteer outside formal campaign structures. The growing role of social media in campaigning is a reflection of changing media habits more generally. Whereas Facebook played a key role in 2008, notably with the Obama campaign using the platform to organize supporters in contested primary and swing states (Kreiss 2012a), the scale of social media use has dramatically grown in four years. On the evening of the 2012 election, nearly 67 million people watched coverage on network television—while 306 million people consumed and produced political content on Facebook and more than 11 million used Twitter for similar purposes, according to the research firm Experian Hitwise (Guynn and Chmielewski 2012). And although Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube are the most popular, and most talked about, social media platforms, campaigns have developed a diverse social media communications strategy to keep pace with rapidly changing media contexts. For example, both 2012 campaigns shared song lists on Spotify, swapped recipes on Pinterest, posted pictures on Instagram, and had staffers spend time on Google Hangouts—*none of which existed in U.S. markets during the 2008 election*.

Although campaigns use social media for a variety of reasons, two developments in strategic

communications during the 2012 cycle are of particular interest in the context of how campaigns seek to control their message. First, both campaigns used Twitter in the hope of amplifying messages from the campaign trail and setting the press agenda. These practices reflect the uniquely public nature of the platform. Second, both campaigns used Twitter and Facebook as platforms to mobilize and leverage the social networks of supporters for strategic communications purposes.

With a growing user base, Twitter emerged as a key medium for campaign communications during the 2012 cycle. To provide a sense of scale, the Obama campaign's tweet announcing his victory in 2008 was retweeted (or shared) 157 times, and on election day, users sent 1.8 million tweets about the presidential election. Now, Twitter gets that many tweets every eight minutes (Fouhy 2012). In 2012, the Obama campaign's tweeted photograph of the president embracing the first lady after networks announced his reelection became social media's most shared image ever at the time (Guynn and Chmielewski 2012), receiving more than 800,000 retweets in less than three days.

Twitter emerged as a significant platform for campaign activity, as staffers on both campaigns sought to leverage the medium to amplify communications, to set the press agenda, and to mobilize supporters. The Obama and Romney campaigns used Twitter to amplify messages that were in the press and to circulate communications from the campaign trail. For instance, the confusing syntax of Obama's 2012 campaign speech regarding transportation and infrastructure led to the quote, "If you've got a business—you didn't build that. Somebody else made that happen" (C-SPAN 2012). The Romney campaign repackaged and repurposed the "you didn't build that" phrase into a campaign slogan used in advertisements, on the trail, on placards and signs, and on Twitter. The Romney campaign promoted user-generated mashups of this phrase on sites such as YouTube and Twitter, helping to amplify this message to wider audiences.

Twitter also served as a forum for user-generated political content more generally. For example, in responding to a question about fair pay for women during a presidential debate, Romney discussed measures he took as governor of Massachusetts to ensure that more women were represented in his administration, saying, "I went to a number of women's groups and said, 'Can you help us find folks?' and they brought us whole binders full of women" (Commission on Presidential Debates 2012). The meme "binders full of women" took off almost immediately in viral fashion through the efforts of a number of Twitter and Facebook users, including one post that generated more than 300,000 likes.⁵

In addition to pushing out campaign communications over Twitter and disseminating supporters' user-generated messages, both campaigns used the platform strategically to try and shape conversations in social media and to set the press agenda. For example, both campaigns purchased promoted trends (tweets and hashtags that Twitter makes highly visible to users) at a cost of well over \$100,000 per day (Kaye 2012b). The goal, equivalent to a national advertising buy in a sense, was to put a particular

message in front of Twitter users. Promoted trends are also designed to encourage user-generated responses to these messages. This often came with considerable risk, as messages such as #Areyoubetteroff? (Romney) and #Forward2012 (Obama) were repurposed and subverted by the campaign's opponents. Campaigns aim to reach not only a large, mass Twitter audience through a promoted trend but, as importantly, the journalists who write about that topic. During the 2012 campaign, promoting trends and pushing messages out through Twitter more generally were new techniques of setting the press agenda and speaking to the political influentials who are heavy users of the platform (Rainie et al. 2012). Although it is too soon for systematic research to be published from the 2012 cycle, anecdotally it is clear that a number of stories from the campaign cycle originated in, or were kept alive by, journalistic reporting on Twitter, such as the reaction to Romney's comments about Big Bird during the first presidential debate.

Both campaigns viewed supporters' digital social networks on Twitter and Facebook as channels of strategic communications. In keeping with a decade-long practice of campaigns attempting to leverage the social networks of supporters as conduits for strategic communications (Kreiss 2012a), both campaigns circulated messages on social platforms in the hope that supporters would be the vehicles for their dissemination to their friends and family, as well as wider social networks. This happened on a number of levels, the simplest being campaigns using Twitter and Facebook in the hope that strategic messages would spread virally through the networks of supporters.

With Facebook, however, strategic communications can be more targeted than Twitter. The Obama campaign, the lead innovator in the 2012 election cycle in social media strategy, integrated parts of its voter databases with supporter data culled from the profiles of individuals signing up for the campaign's Facebook application. This enabled the campaign to access a supporter's friends list and then target members of his or her social network based on characteristics such as where they lived. This then enabled the campaign to engage in what technology journalist Nick Judd (2012b) calls "targeted sharing," which entailed sharing certain content with the supporter in ways that it would end up in the feeds of targets in that supporter's social network. Recent research in political communication suggests that this can be persuasive and have a positive impact on voter turnout (Bond et al. 2012). Even more, the targeted sharing of content turned into very specific appeals in the final weeks of the campaign. As Judd (2012b) details,

Obama for America asked its supporters who had been signed up for the OfA Facebook application to pick potential voters from among their friends in swing states and urge them to get to the ballot box or register to vote. In the final days before the election and on election day, the application flooded its users with notifications asking them to reach out on the campaign's behalf. Officials told Time's Michael Scherer that a staggering 20 percent of people asked by their friends to register, vote or take another activity went ahead and did it. While the campaign hasn't shared how many people elected to press the case for Obama on Facebook in this way, and this is only remarkable if enough people participated to

help close the distance for OfA in voter registrations and turnout where it had those goals, the success rate is high enough to raise eyebrows. Behind the Facebook application driving get out the vote was the same targeted sharing code.

As detailed earlier, all of this is premised on voter data—knowing who a campaign’s supporters are, identifying priority targets in their social networks, and being able to track the outcomes of voter contacts to measure effectiveness in terms of electoral strategy. These activities now lie at the foundation of contemporary campaigning and have made electoral politics an increasingly data-driven enterprise, shaping everything from which voters are contacted by a candidate’s supporters to what they hear and see online, on their doorsteps, and in their social networks. For example, during the 2012 cycle, the Obama campaign leveraged its data to achieve a much more seamless integration of voter contacts across various platforms according to the dictates of its electoral strategy. Coordinating voter contacts on doorsteps and on Facebook is a massive organizational challenge, one facilitated in the 2012 cycle by the Obama campaign’s social organizing tool, Dashboard. Dashboard was a platform that helped organize the numerous applications of the campaign and streamline canvassing, resulting in the more effective coordination of the activities of thousands of volunteers. The Obama Dashboard volunteer platform created volunteer teams based on location, achieved a degree of integration between the campaign’s databases and supporters’ contacts on Facebook, and displayed local voter contact targets and scripts for supporters’ canvass efforts. This platform allowed the campaign to “break down the distinction between online and offline organizing, giving every supporter the same opportunities to get involved that they would find in a field office,” according to the deputy campaign manager for Obama for America Stephanie Cutter (Calderon 2012). Meanwhile, Dashboard was integrated with a mobile application that allowed volunteers to more effectively support the field effort (Lohr 2012). The Obama for America mobile app allowed voters to find local events, to report potential voter fraud, to find nearby houses to canvass and enter data about the results, and to donate directly to the campaign. In addition, the app was synced with Facebook, Twitter, email, and text messages so that the campaign could integrate data and users could share information on their activities as widely as possible (Tau 2012).

Conclusion

The 2012 campaign cycle featured a dynamic tension between the possibilities for control and disruption of campaign messages. On the one hand, campaigns over the past decade—particularly on the Democratic side of the aisle—have invested heavily in the infrastructure for gathering, managing, analyzing, and acting on data so as to better coordinate strategic communications across a variety of platforms, including the television screens, front porches, and social media accounts of voters. The

Obama campaign leveraged these infrastructural investments, using data to model voters, to discover their issues of concern, and to target groups and even individual voters with tailored and social messages. Through increasingly computational managerial practices, which entail leveraging data and analysis to shape messaging and resource flows, campaigns attempt to better know and more efficiently and strategically communicate with the electorate.

At the same time, however, as the discussion of Twitter suggests, this is far from the professionally managed polity that some commentators have suggested. Hashtags become vehicles for supporters, and opponents, to creatively repurpose campaign content. Journalists remain the intermediaries for much political communication, and setting the agenda for voters is as much premised on journalistic buy-in as a campaign's ability to speak directly to the electorate. Finally, the social targeting and volunteer enthusiasm on Facebook and Dashboard is dependent on the ultimate buy-in of the supporters who devote their social identities and hours to the cause. In this sense, while big data, voter modeling, and targeting were at the forefront of the 2012 election, campaigning was still premised on the old-fashioned attempts to generate interest, enthusiasm, and political desire among the electorate.

What is clear is that scholars must be attentive to the actual, data-driven practices of campaigns in the study of contemporary strategic political communication. In order to understand the effects of negative advertising, for instance, scholars need to understand how these messages are crafted and increasingly targeted in very specific ways. At the same time, as the foregoing discussion reveals, much of what scholars take to be the organic or viral processes of social media can often be subtly engineered and managed, at least probabilistically.

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Notes

- 1 Portions of this section have been adapted from Kreiss 2012c, 2012d.
- 2 The technical and institutional histories of the voter files, databases, and interface systems the two parties and their candidates use vary. For an in-depth discussion of these differences, see Kreiss 2012a and Nielsen 2012.
- 3 In numerous interviews conducted by the first author for an in-progress book project, Republican campaign staffers and party operatives active over the past decade cited a growing gap between the two parties in voter data and field infrastructure. Republicans even cite how their party has lost ground since 2004, when George W. Bush's reelection campaign fielded ground and Internet operations that were superior to those of the Democrats. Indeed, neither John McCain nor Mitt Romney could match the number of votes cast for President Bush in 2004.
- 4 Pending future research, it is impossible to state with any degree of certainty what failed with Project ORCA, although it appears that it was ultimately a problem of technical capacity, organization, and execution. First, like Project Houdini (discussed later in the chapter), ORCA was not able to handle large-scale database updates. Second, ORCA was poorly integrated with the larger field effort, including the structures the campaign had in place to train and manage volunteers. Finally, the implementation of ORCA failed to take account of the needs and practices of field staffers and volunteers.
- 5 See "Binders Full of Women," Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/romneybindersfullofwomen>.