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Social media campaigning in Europe: mapping the terrain

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The evolution of political communication as a practice has seen political actors constantly adapting to communication technologies. Scammell (1994) documents how, as a gubernatorial candidate, Theodore Roosevelt exploited the potential of embedded pictures in print news, and how UK prime minister Stanley Baldwin employed actors to help him develop the appropriate tone of voice for radio to match the news he was imparting. Later, Ronald Reagan pioneered the televisual performance, while in the UK Margaret Thatcher was redefining prime ministerial media management. While mainstream political figures innovated with traditional media the pioneers of Internet campaigning were largely outsiders; challengers to the US two-party system. When former wrestler Jesse Ventura crowdsourced support for his 1998 insurgent campaign that won him the Governorship of Minnesota, he demonstrated how an outsider could challenge the establishment using digital technology. The unsuccessful but ground breaking campaign of Democrat candidate Howard Dean in 2003 demonstrated the utility of an online crowdfunding strategy. It was Dean's innovative style that would inform the Obama campaign of 2007-8, who would harness the full potential of social media to reach out to voters, earn donations as well as

building a campaign infrastructure across the US by harnessing the enthusiasm of his young support base (Lilleker & Jackson, 2011) as well as an established progressive online activist network (Karpf, 2012; Kreiss, 2012). While the history of innovative use of technology has a US-centric flavour, one should not underestimate the impact of these developments across Western democracies. Campaign strategists travel the world learning how to campaign and what innovations work, shopping around to learn the latest tactical advantages (Plasser & Plasser, 2003) and then adapting them for competitive advantage in their home nations (Lees-Marshment & Lilleker, 2012). The developments have largely seen digital technology employed to further the objectives of the campaign, not creating interactive spaces where citizens and politicians can meet or where political issues of the day are debated (Lilleker & Vedel, 2013). Hence, technology is employed to meet the requirements of a campaign with minimal adaptation to the content of political communication. The communication forms appropriate to technologies, with Twitter and Facebook as was formerly the case with radio and television, become incorporated into the toolboxes and repertoires of political campaigners.

In turn, as digital technologies increasingly become embedded in political communication, research has burgeoned with works exploring the way in which email, websites and more recently the plethora of social media platforms are employed and impact upon the implementation of election campaigns. Studies have charted the increased use of websites, weblog tools, email and most recently social media by political campaigns (Gibson & Ward, 2009), as well as the use of similar platforms by citizens to communicate about elections and political issues more generally (Loader, Vromen & Xenos, 2014). As political participation develops an online dimension so political parties, in particular during elections, seek to exploit

the affordances of digital technologies to harness supporters and garner support. The questions are how and with what effect?

Apart from the innovations of outsider candidates like Ventura, the early days of Internet campaigning involved the development of something akin to an online shop front. The website provided a means where citizens could learn more about a candidate or party, and be persuaded that the platform they offered was an attractive and viable alternative to their competitors. Websites have evolved from being static, information-heavy spaces to stripped down, functional campaigning hubs. When entering a party website visitors are more likely to face invitations to sign-up, join and donate than a campaign slogan. These developments reflect the recognition by strategists that visitors are likely to have already formed an interest and possibly be supportive prior to their visiting. The idea that a website will gain accidental visitors in the days of search results being determined by complex and personalised algorithms and search engine optimisation strategies is moribund.

While a website has become a standard campaign tool for the postmodern campaigner, the new election battleground is increasingly found on social media. Political actors at all levels, from presidents to neighbourhood campaigners, are increasingly likely to use platforms such as Facebook and Twitter as their primary means of communication. Such tools clearly mark a significant step forward in the technical and practical 'know-how' needed to run and maintain a viable digital campaign. Their introduction, at once, bring a more multi-modal, cross-referencing and interactive style to the political communication genre. They also offer a myriad of new ways for citizens to connect with politicians - *likes*, *shares*, *retweets* and *follows* - have all now

become standard terms in the campaign lexicon. Each action has the potential of making the campaign more visible to a wider audience, getting the message out while also drawing in visitors (Gerodimos & Justinussen, 2015). The social media pages created for a campaign can then direct followers to other sites and video content, drawing them closer to the campaign.

Beyond the expanded and enriched voter interface they offer there is also a richer organizational legacy that flows from campaigns adaptation to the Facebook era. Through social networking sites it now becomes possible for parties, big and small, to engage in new forms of community building and to open their boundaries beyond formal membership (Gibson, 2015; Gibson et al. 2016). Through Facebook groups, meetup software, hashtags and dissemination of mobile apps parties are increasingly able to mobilise and ‘weaponise’ members and also more crucially non-members to take action on their behalf during and also between elections (Karpf, 2012; Kreiss, 2012; Warren, Sulaiman & Jaafar, 2015). The new resources that such tools generate clearly offer a considerable boost to parties’ capacity to fight and win elections and may even provide a way to regenerate Europe’s faltering ‘mass’ party model. However, the inevitable dilution of elite control and party discipline that this more devolved and ‘outsourced’ model of organization causes could also act as a barrier to their full exploitation. Whether this tension will be resolved through a shift toward more personalised and candidate-centered politics and a further weakening of traditional party models is thus an open question.

However the wider tectonic plates of party systems may shift in response to the new technology it is a given that political candidates and parties will continue to compete for attention via digital media. Beyond signing-up helpers, the internet and particularly social media has a range of

affordances that can help campaigners persuade voters into the polling booth on election day. Campaigns utilise the full hypermedia environment to disseminate content that combines slogans and images which can gain accelerated reach through peer-to-peer sharing within online networks. While the traditional media forms of television and newspapers remain the main priorities during election campaigns, digital communications and social media in particular do not lag far behind (Lilleker, Stetka & Tenscher, 2015).

While success can be measured in election outcomes, it remains challenging to determine what impact digital technologies really have in securing votes. The recent surprise success of leftist insurgent movements in the UK during the 2017 General Election and on the right in the U.S. with the Trump 'takeover' of the Republican party are widely credited to their leaders and followers savvy use of Twitter and the unique instantaneous sharing facilities of social media. Isolating any communication medium from others, however, is complex and challenging; especially when attempting to isolate the effects of a medium on the attitudes and behaviours of an audience. Experimental research has developed understandings of the role that mass media plays, in particular Graber's work on television (Graber & Dunaway, 2014), in exposing audiences to political ideas as well as influencing voter choices. Similarly research has also given insights into the power of websites, weblogs and social media for increasing engagement in politics, heightening the propensity to seek information and take part in a range of acts of political participation (Gil de Zúñiga, Veenstra, Vraga & Shah, 2010). Therefore, arguably, political science has laid the groundwork for understanding that media can impact on voter choices and that such impacts can be measured. Yet the hybrid media environment mapped by Chadwick (2017) remains somewhat enigmatic in terms of its impact upon voter attitudes,

interest, engagement, participation and voter choices and the links between each of these components. The digital environment affords visibility to a range of political information outlets, legacy media, insurgent online-only news sites as well as the platforms created by campaigners. These may offer genuine facts, biased reports, loaded arguments or even fake news but all are part of the digital communication environment. Due to the difficulty in charting how citizens navigate the online world it remains equally difficult to determine the relationship between the visibility afforded parties or candidates by having a presence across digital platforms and their vote share. Presence is also only one of myriad variables that might determine whether a party or candidate wins attention, engagement and support. Parties and candidates can use social media platforms in a variety of ways, often simply due to their personal perspectives on the efficacy of pursuing a given strategy. Differential usage of digital platforms can be found in the type of content posted or the levels of interactivity offered, for example, but do such variances matter? Variances in communication strategy have been found to impact upon the receivers' levels of engagement, their propensity to seek further information, and determine their propensity to participate (Xenos & Moy, 2007). Yet isolating these factors remains a challenge for strategists and researchers alike. While the *ceteris paribus* principle can provide indications (Koc-Michalska, Lilleker, Surowiec & Baranowski, 2014), it remains impossible to isolate any one factor when studying the vibrant atmosphere that is an election campaign. The evidence suggests that independent of scientific evidence for a digital campaign effect, campaign strategists see these technologies of being able to offer significant gains. In the UK social media campaigning by the Conservatives in 2015 were argued to be pivotal in persuading floating voters in marginal constituencies (Moore, 2016), while the Labour-supportive Momentum infrastructure was

designed to leverage younger disaffected citizens (Klug, Rees & Schneider, 2016). The belief thus predominates that while traditional media remain a key battleground, innovations within the digital environments can make a real difference in winning over voters (Lilleker, Stetka & Tenscher, 2015).

This special edition collects together seven papers which add theoretically and empirically to academic understanding of how candidates and parties view and so use digital technologies to communicate with voters and explores the effect of usage on the attitudes and behaviours of citizens within the context of elections in Europe (national, regional or European Parliament). Recognising the US as the locus of innovation in this area, we wish to explore how digital technologies are employed in systems where resources are less plentiful and where the political culture is less polarized and expressive. We cannot aspire to provide a definitive response to the very complex questions of effects; rather we seek to contribute to those wider debates. Our papers map onto debates regarding how politicians view the potential of social media as a campaigning tool, as well as how they embrace the hybrid media environment. Papers test the validity of claims of an 'Internet effect', exploring whether political and media-related variables impact upon any suggested effect due to social media campaigning. The contributors also explore the demand side, testing how citizens use the online environment to gain information and with what effect as well as what communication they are most likely to share, the suggestion being what they engage with is what they like. Cumulatively, we offer new perspectives on social media campaigning within European democracies, so contributing a more global and holistic understanding of how campaigning is effected by, and might be enhanced and given greater utility by, developing a digital strategy.

This special edited collection includes research that adopts quantitative and qualitative methodologies in order to contribute to knowledge and debates from a number of perspectives. We begin with- candidates and practitioner studies (Klinger and Russmann 2017, Sandberg and Öhberg 2017), traditional and/or social media content analysis (Bene 2017, Blach-Ørsten, Eberholst and Burkal 2017, Rauchfleisch, Kovic, Metag, Caspar, Szenogrady 2017) and the survey based studies of citizens (Garzia 2017, Galais and Cardenal 2017). Cumulatively, these contributions aid the development of understanding of the role and motivation for political actors using social media; they also examine the consequences of social media communication, as well as testing the potential impact of the traditional and digital media presence on the propensity to vote. The issue includes studies based on single country data (Denmark, Hungary, Italy or Sweden) as well as comparative research (Austria and Switzerland, France, Germany, Spain and Canada).

Klinger and Russmann (2017) define the motives, goals, strategies and tactics of social media use within the media planning of Swiss and Austrian parties during electoral campaigns. A social media presence seems to be a 'must have' and part of the all-media presence rather than a conscious strategic vision of how new media communication could be employed to enhance the scope of campaigning. The campaigners claim direct interactivity, as the main reasoning for having a social media presence. Regardless of the country context, the strategy chosen (e.g. controlled vs. general access, time employment etc.) innovation depends mainly on parties' resources. Still among communication strategists social media remains the secondary channel of communication – since 'beer (on the market square) is more effective' - with deep skepticism concerning the real gains that social media may bring to campaign effectiveness.

Sandberg and Öhberg (2017) study the motivations, meaning and possible gains from social media usage by candidates in Swedish 2014 European Parliament election, with special focus on gender variance. The results indicate a distinction along campaign types, with social media emerging as a separate factor. Gender differences are important in understanding differences in approaches to using campaigning tools, with female candidates evaluating the value of social media higher, especially Facebook, followed by Twitter. Women candidates seem, however, to use social media as a partisan promotional tool rather than for personal advertising.

Blach-Ørsten, Eberholst and Burkal (2017) employ the hybridization hypothesis to describe politicians' multi-media campaigning during the Danish 2015 general election. Subsequently, they compare the traditional and new media (Twitter) appearance of those candidates by counting the recognition they receive from online or traditional media outlets. Little evidence is found to suggest a hybrid communication strategy is embedded in Danish election campaigns, rather if used it is by young candidates standing in large cities. The authors find traditional media still focusing on the most prominent candidates, with a relatively small number of politicians receiving attention from both traditional and new media outlets. No clear evidence is found for a relationship between electoral success and social media performance.

Rauchfleisch and colleagues (2017), in the context of Swiss elections, discuss the role of 'brute force' effects, the term they employ to identify the possible impact from having high visibility within traditional and social media on electoral outcomes in Swiss elections. The authors find a minimal effect from both media outlets on electoral victory (with incumbency playing the crucial role for being elected). Yet, more granular analysis (using the number of votes obtained)

illustrates the positive role of the traditional media and a substantial effect from having a Facebook presence. Surprisingly, the Facebook effect does not originate from the activity of the candidates themselves but rather from the community's resonance. Overall, the possible *brute force* effect from traditional media, especially newspaper, remains stronger than any impact from social media campaigning.

Galais and Cardenal (2017) discuss the potential effect of Internet use by voters on their propensity to acknowledge and possibly vote for the more marginal parties. Based on a study in four nations (France, Germany, Swiss and Canada) the authors find that traditional media usage lowers the voter's chance to preserve or switch their vote-decision towards small parties. On the contrary Internet use, especially browsing party websites, encourages greater consideration of voting for smaller parties, particularly when there are high levels of voter uncertainty. Therefore, party website browsing can increase the propensity to vote for marginal parties. Nevertheless, the authors remain skeptical when estimating the potential of digital technology use in changing voter decisions.

Garzia (2017) in his research points toward the role of the evaluation of the leaders' personality by voters in shaping their voting patterns. He compares the possible impact of a personalization effect among voters consuming mostly traditional media versus online resources within the 2013 Italian elections. Garzia finds the effect of leaders' personality evaluation on voting behavior stronger for those heavily exposed to television, on the contrary those active on the internet pay significantly less attention to leaders' personality evaluations. Though, the effect of personality

evaluation remains strong for those active on the internet and increases the propensity to vote for the Five Star Movement.

Bene (2017) focuses on the most viral Facebook posts during the 2014 General Election in Hungary. He studies the logic of the most viral posts, and compares them to those which did not receive high virality. Additionally he follows those posts' life after being shared. In the Hungarian context, mostly the posts by oppositional left-wing parties received the most extended shares. The virality does not depend on the structure or timing of the post, but rather on its emotionally-negative character and more personal commentary than general information provision. Further, Bene finds that once shared, the posts have a very short life, with minimal echo among the users— with one exception - if a post is shared by a prominent Facebook user, another politician or important opinion leader, it receives significantly greater resonance and a longer social media life.

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