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RUNNING HEAD: Political Consultants

The New Media Designs of Political Consultants: Campaign Production in a Fragmented Era

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ABSTRACT: New media technologies have been lauded for their potential in de-monopolizing gatekeeper power and rejuvenating democracy. This research inquires into how those changes in the media environment are affecting (and being affected by) consultants involved in the production of political communication. Drawing upon dozens of in-depth interviews with these elite operatives, the paper highlights how strategies are developed, practices are executed, and messages are encoded given increasing fragmentation and narrowcasting. It examines these consultants' roles in managing the news agenda and political discourse by expanding partisan spaces online for content creation and narrowcasting more nuanced, flexible messages to targeted niches. The study concludes with consideration given to how these efforts might hinder certain public sphere ideals.

KEYWORDS: new media, political communication, campaigns, consultants, fragmentation

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The New Media Designs of Political Consultants:

Campaign Production in a Fragmented Era

"There is a cliché that says talk is cheap. But to strategic political communicators, talk, and the control of talk, is power" (Manheim, 1991, p. 7).

"Campaigns are in the content business." – Steve Schmidt, Republican campaign strategist (Hagan, 2012)

Over the course of two decades, the Internet and other new media technologies have profoundly affected the ways and means of political communication. The 2012 U.S. elections offer an opportunity to take stock of these patterns from the perspective of consultants and strategists tasked with advising candidates and legislative leaders and, more specifically, to chart their assumptions and practices as journalism and advertising fragment as institutions. Drawing upon a unique qualitative dataset – dozens of interviews with these elite operatives involved in producing and encoding campaign communication – this research examines their roles in managing the news agenda and political discourse by expanding more partisan online spaces for content creation and narrowcasting more nuanced, flexible messages to targeted niches. The study concludes by considering how these efforts might impede the ideals of the public sphere.

Literature Review

New Media and Politics

From the telegraph and newspaper to radio and television, advances in communication media have long prefigured changing campaign practices (Trent, Friedenberg, & Denton, 2011). As networked interactivity subsumes mass broadcasting as the "core organizing principle of [today's] communicative environment," scholars

need to inquire how contemporary technologies are forcing candidates to rethink strategy and messaging (Bruns, 2008, p. 14). Since the 1990s, the Internet has radically altered campaigning, offering a variety of new avenues for communicating with voters (Davis, Baumgartner, Francia, & Morris, 2009). Some contend that we are living through a new "communication revolution" in U.S. history: "an era of information abundance, fracturing the communication monopoly of old-style organizations and allowing many resource-poor new voices to be heard" (Bimber, 2011, p. 7). As such, sanguine proclamations abound about the potential for this technology to rejuvenate democracy, with the hope that the Internet might level the playing field for long-shot candidates and enrich the depth of our political communication. Much of that optimism is based on the premise that the Internet heralds greater pluralism for marginalized groups and signals a grassroots undermining of elitist monopolies on information (Chadwick, 2006).

Some have suggested that because of these fragmented channels, traditional information gatekeepers are seeing their powers wane as the long-dominant agenda setting paradigm no longer so adequately reflects reality (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008, pp. 708–709). Amidst a more "complex, chaotic communication environment," one of the critical questions for researchers is how operatives seek to set the news agenda nowadays: If the "top-down, centralized, industrially organized media apparatus" of mass broadcasting was supposedly "relatively easy for political elites and other actors to manage, manipulate, and control," how, then, are campaigns being reactive to and proactive about these new conditions (McNair, 2009, pp. 217, 219)? Because most political content still results from "deliberate manipulation by social elites and their 'spin industry,'" "skillful communication manipulators can use two-way interactive

communication just as effectively as uni-directional communication to steer people" (Louw, 2005, p. 124). Given those technological changes, this research asks: How are political consultants working to manage the news agenda (*RQ1*)?

Data, Segmentation, and Targeting

Segmentation can be defined as "the art and science of using the available information about the audience, which is to say the work product of all that rating and data-mining, to best advantage" (Manheim, 2011, p. 50). Thanks to sophisticated technological advances, data mining and message segmentation were one of the most prominent storylines during 2012 election. Conventional wisdom has long held that, "The more specific and tailored the message, the more effective the piece" (Trent et al., 2011, p. 332). A related term, "narrowcasting," dates back to the early 1990s; just as computer databases had streamlined the processing of political information for direct mail, both e-mail and Web page customization followed suit (Howard, 2005, p. 8). Micro-targeting specialists were soon reaching out to voters based upon statistical probabilities of persuasive effectiveness (Sides, Shaw, Grossmann, & Lipsitz, 2012, p. 127). George W. Bush's reelection campaign inaugurated many of these tactics to great success, including the synthesis of consumer data with voter records to model and segment more individualized marketing schemes (Issenberg, 2012). In 2008, Barack Obama's tech team continued to refine these capacities, including the development of algorithms to predict and address (or avoid) strong positions on hot-button issues (e.g., abortion) during voter outreach. Indeed, the Obama campaign represented "the fullest realization of trends in the political field toward crafting better means of collecting, storing, analyzing, and acting upon data about citizens, their online behavior, and their

social relationships" (Kreiss & Howard, 2010, p. 1033). For example, they exploited online cookies for those who had visited the official Web site and could then receive unique messages about, say, education policy if they clicked onward to a parenting blog (Green, 2008). This allowed Obama to maintain "hope" as a brand, while micro-targeting negative messages "under the radar" of news coverage (Hagan, 2012).

Political parties and particular campaigns now harbor enormous databases of personal information including an individual's name, address, phone number, voting patterns, political donations, estimated income, race, family members, and even mortgage value and magazine subscriptions (Sides et al., 2012, p. 76). Aristotle Inc. has been a leading firm in this business of "political data mining," which also includes the interlocking connections between those individuals featured in its database (Verini, 2007). With unprecedented access to voters' identities, strategists now see their work not unlike "the marketing efforts of credit card companies and big-box retailers" and seek to "train voters to go to the polls through subtle cues, rewards and threats" (Duhigg, 2012). However, research has not yet explored how this refined knowledge influences the encoding of political communication. Thus, this project inquires: How are segmentation opportunities affecting the development of campaign messages (*RQ2*)?

Methodology

This project thus represents a study of political communication from a "cultural production" perspective with an emphasis on changes in strategy resulting from technological change (Peterson & Anand, 2004). Cultural industries are those that "deal primarily with the industrial production and circulation of texts" or, more abstractly, a collection of institutions "that are most directly involved in the production of social

meaning" (Hesmondhalgh, 2007, p. 12). Communication research has not traditionally treated political campaigns as form of cultural production, instead pursuing Hollywood films, prime time television, or, on the non-fiction side, daily newspapers as the usual sites for this kind of inquiry. Yet the consultants involved in the election process should be likewise analyzed for their efforts to "encode" the texts of a given campaign – whether those be advertisements, press articles, or speeches – for they, too, are involved in creation and circulation of (political) meaning (Hall, 1980). Indeed, Frank Biocca usefully likens these professionals to "semiotics engineers," in that they attempt to "prime certain schemas" (Medvic, 2001, pp. 43, 47). I specifically seek to understand how this new media environment is "restructuring… time, space, and place in daily work processes" for these professionals as informed by a changing "media logic" (by which I mean, the "specific forms and processes which organize the work done within a particular medium") (Deuze, 2007, p. 110; Klinenberg & Benzecry, 2005, p. 8; Serazio, 2013).

Like Philip Howard's (2005) work, this has been an "empirical study of the social construction of new media" in politics (p. 74). It views news websites, online advertising, and social media outreach as "strategically crafted artifacts that reflect the cultural-historical context and as campaign resources that function as tools for communication" (Foot & Schneider, 2006, p. 12). Like Daniel Kreiss (2009), I have conducted open-ended interviews with key actors complemented by press articles and online material (p. 282). Such work builds on scholars who have earlier based their research on in-depth conversations with campaign consultants (Dulio, 2004; Magleby & Patterson, 1998; Medvic, 2004), though, as Doris Graber (2004) points out, less than 10% of articles published in political communication journals rely upon this method. Yet by

using grounded theory to discover patterns (rather than measure pre-selected phenomena through quantitative surveys), semi-structured interviewing of elites is especially effective in yielding an "*in-depth understanding* of a phenomenon and discovering aspects of that phenomenon that researchers did not anticipate" (Brians, Willnat, Manheim, & Rich, 2010, p. 365, italics original).

Curiously – though not surprisingly – there is a relative dearth of scholarship that has explored the work of consultants within the political communication literature. As Sarah Allen Gershon (2012) noted, few scholars have examined these kinds of elite actors that exert influence on political discourse. More research is needed on "the role of media consultants in the heat of the campaign," as some ask (and I attempt to answer here): "What kinds of assumptions do consultants make about journalists and citizens in designing campaign messages, attacks, and counterattacks?" (Gulati, Just, & Crigler, 2004, p. 251) Scholarship, moreover, needs to account for those assumptions in the context of fast-changing media and technology environments, and inquire with those "professionals who work behind the scenes with data to identify voters and coordinate collective action" through the "technical practices of electoral campaigns" (Kreiss & Howard, 2010, p. 1045; Kreiss, 2009, p. 282). It is, of course, understandable that the practices and perspectives of these consultants would be kept "off-stage" from academic (much less journalistic) inquiry. From its earliest years, political consulting has been, by design, conducted out of view (Friedenberg, 1997, p. 2). Yet this absence also symbolizes a wider deficiency in political communication research – a literature less often oriented to the production or encoding-side of those mediated messages (Rogers, 2004). Gershon's (2012) work on press secretaries offers a methodological template, as

my interviews were also "designed to examine the methods representatives (and their staff) use to communicate their messages to constituents" (p. 165).

Between June and December 2012 – a period optimally timed for election discourse – I contacted 108 potential interviewees to participate in the study. The targets chosen stemmed from a combination of purposive and snowball sampling – strategies considered effective for a "relatively limited," "hard-to-reach," and "somewhat interconnected" population like campaign consultants – and conversations were conducted until tests of "completeness" and "saturation" had been achieved (i.e., "an overall sense of the meaning of a… theme or process" was gained with little new material elicited from subsequent interviews) (Schutt, 2004, p. 151). Of those contacted, I ultimately secured 38 one-on-one, in-depth interviews lasting, on average, 37 minutes each (Lindlof, 1995).[1] (Although longer interviews are certainly always desirable, it was often a challenge obtaining even that much time with these elite professionals.)

Preexisting personal contacts with the press secretaries for a Republican congressional representative and a Democratic presidential candidate proved useful at the start of this research; both of these "key informants" granted me interviews of their own and assisted in making introductions to other colleagues working in the field on both sides of the aisle. Snowball sampling from that yielded about half of the total number of interviews completed; I "cold-contacted" others (whose names had appeared in press coverage as prominent and relevant) with a short e-mail explaining the project and soliciting their participation. To that end, I deliberately sought out a diversity of vantage points to contribute to the research questions and eventually achieved an even ideological split between Republicans and Democrats. Moreover, I hoped to capture a heterogeneous

mix of professional capacities including 9 self-described general consultants (handling a variety of roles), 8 digital or Web strategy specialists, 7 press secretaries or communication directors, and 7 advertising producers, as well as other, even more particular roles like opposition research, speechwriting, blogging, and media buying.

It should be noted, however, that these roles were fluid and represented only a single snapshot in time within a tumultuous industry. Because interviews began with a brief description of the participant's experience, it quickly revealed those who moved in and out of various campaign and staff roles as well as in and out of the public and private sector (with many opening their own small firms). An interviewee, to give one example, might have started as a junior press aide to a U.S. senator, done work as a state communications director in a presidential campaign, served as staff director for his party's U.S. senate communications team, and ultimately founded a digital opposition research firm. The majority of interviewees were based in Washington D.C. and worked at the higher echelons of campaigning and political communication on behalf of individual candidates and national parties (i.e., at the presidential and congressional level, in state and national races), though some mentioned occasional issues-based advocacy for assorted interest groups. I also wound up netting a diverse sample of ages and career lengths from those fresh out of college to those closer to retirement with several decades of campaign experience, though the majority were in their 30s and 40s and skewed exceedingly male (all but 2 of the 38 participants).

Interviews followed a semi-structured schedule and covered topics including their background, typical work activities, technological changes, partisan media venues, news and campaign cycle management, and audience targeting. The two most basic and

essential roles of the political consultant – the creation of campaign advertising and the development of message strategy – were the primary focus of interview discussions (Devine, 2008, p. 29). A major part of the operative's job is to sway the political agenda through decision making about these tactics – indeed, some claim that the main battle in a given campaign is actually over setting the priorities of problems as opposed to differing policy prescriptions for solving them (Dulio, 2004, pp. 72, 76; Sides et al., 2012, p. 133). The following section illuminates the practices and perspectives of these elites in manipulating the modern media environment toward those ends.

Findings

Expanding the Spaces for Political Content

For political consultants like this opposition research firm's president, the "playing field" for political content has widened dramatically relative to earlier decades:

> [The] thing about new media is that there are just much more, there so many more venues to get your message out then there were when I started and so there's a lot of – there's a lot of space to be filled, right? … You look back on it and it was just your – the big three, the cables, the networks, the major newspapers … There were things that – if they didn't make it into your 14 column inches, whatever it is that you were allotted for the day, before everyone had a blog and was posting online, you know, 15 times a day – if it didn't make it in, it didn't make it in. But now there's always a venue to get your information out, so things that at some point might not have been a story, you're given more space to kind of cultivate those stories. Because there's always something out there … that needs to be filled. We're a very news-hungry country.

Interviewees shared a sense, both good and bad, that the political communication machinery had become a "beast" needing to be fed constantly, in the words of one media consultant at a digital strategy firm, and that "if you have enough contacts, you can get pretty much anything posted somewhere." On one hand, this fissure of control from what had been a comparative information monopoly in the heyday of traditional gatekeepers empowers the consultant: "It used to be that if you tried to pitch a story to the local paper and they said no, well, that was the end of it and your story didn't get out. Now you [still] have an opportunity," one congressional deputy chief of staff told me, adding that this also enabled him to push back against inaccurate coverage independent of the source, rather "than just being at the mercy of a newspaper or its top editors" to run his qualms.

On the other hand, this expansion of potential channels has forced consultants to reorient themselves to a much wider range of potential output, as one presidential campaign's press secretary explained:

> Whereas the old model, there used to be, there were … gatekeepers, whether they were editors or producers or reporters or columnists that decided what they wanted to write about and everybody focused their attention sort of on influencing them or creating news hooks so that their message could get picked up – instead, now, because you have information that's more mobile, you can create your own content and drive it across different platforms.

This enlarged perspective on delivering political content registers across a variety of digital touch-points. E-mail and social media are increasingly thought of as "much better ways to communicate with your constituents than trying to get one story every six months" in the home district newspaper, particularly as those outlets have fewer

resources devoted to Washington, according to one congressional press secretary. Similarly, one political advertising agency's president spoke of online video capacitating longer-form approaches than the 30-second spot had previously constricted (e.g., 30-minute "films" like the anti-Romney *King of Bain* that appeared in 2012). Another presidential candidate's press secretary explained his "flood the zone" logic for search engine optimization where "what you do is put a million things online, so that there's so many things out there that you overwhelm with good shit and the bad shit moves down."

Given that "thirsting for and need for more content than ever before," a candidacy announcement no longer simply entails dropping a press release and holding a "pseudo-event," as once might have sufficed, said another political advertising agency's president, but rather also cueing up an online video component which requires earlier coordination in terms of creative production. Thus, the diffusion of messaging might start with planting items in the blogosphere, across social media, and through targeted ads until "mainline news sources" later subsume them – which represents, in his words, "the capacity to sort of get things in the bloodstream in more ways than in the past."

Contemporary political communication strategies like these seek to marginalize and bypass traditional journalistic arbiters: "If you don't have to worry about the mainstream media and the 30 people sitting in the White House press room or covering Congress to get out your message, you're a step ahead of the game," explained one strategic media consultant. Those gatekeepers may find their agenda-setting powers waning relative to the momentum of stories and issues fomented in new media spaces. One opposition research firm's president thus sees the flow of political information evolving from a "top-down" structure to something more "circular" in nature: "It doesn't

matter where [a story] starts, it can get the legs that needs" nowadays. Another opposition research specialist summarized:

> [Before] we could capture the [attack] information, but disseminating it had to go through traditional sources meaning you had to sell the story to a reporter, so I did a ton of off-the-record meetings with reporters and trying to explain why this was newsworthy – that's not necessary anymore. It's changed journalism and it's changed research – if we want to go up with something, if we find somebody saying something stupid, we just upload it to our website … You don't need reporters anymore to disseminate your information … They're no longer the gatekeepers of what gets into a story – they're more, they now are responding as much to what's going on as controlling it. And that's changed campaigns tremendously.

Without question, the increasingly availability of more partisan, "echo chamber" news venues aids this effort, as the specialist further described:

> Ten years ago, if I wanted to break a story, we had to sell it to a reporter. Now, I can sell it to someone local or in the blogosphere who's much more likely to be on my side… [Then] I can go and say to reporters, 'Hey, look what's on site X,' and, 'This is getting some traction – you may want to cover it.' And it also makes the job easier for reporters because now … they can write it as, 'This is what's happening during the day,' and they don't have to take as much heat from campaigns because they're not the ones who wrote the [original] story … The opposing press secretary can yell at them, but they're saying, 'Look, this is already out there; I didn't break this. I'm covering it and it's a story.'

The deputy communications director for a national party committee echoed this in describing these tactics of getting a "more conservative or liberal website" to put a story or issue "in the water and it might force [the mainstream media] to cover it." That said, these consultants still see the primary function of partisan spaces online as oriented toward organization, mobilization, and fundraising. For instance, blogosphere powerhouses like RedState.com and DailyKos.com are thought best for rallying volunteers and gathering petition signatures. Moreover, because the vast majority of those who visit a campaign's website usually already support the candidate, little, if any, space should be wasted on persuading imagined moderates relative to pursuing e-mail addresses and donations, according to the vice president of a digital strategy firm. To that end, consultants said they're often on the lookout for issues to ignite fundraising success and see the Web as vital in building for that infrastructure; Ron Paul, for example, was cited as particularly effective in this regard in recent campaign cycles, triggering millions in online donations with "hot button" attacks on the Federal Reserve.

By contrast, consultants suggested that the best strategy for the opposition's echo chamber was, plainly, to avoid and ignore: "You didn't respond to their press inquiries unless you absolutely had to. You basically wrote them off – there's no benefit I can get from talking with these people, so why do it?" asked the campaign manager for one U.S. senate candidate. "They're just out to get me – they want blood. That's what they're looking for." There was, moreover, little use in bothering with the *audiences* for that opposition media either: "You're not going to change their mind. They are who they're voting for and there's nothing that anyone can say on television that's going to shift their decision," said the president of a direct mail and opposition research firm. Not

surprisingly, this also means that, as effective as the echo chamber might be perceived as for some goals and processes, it holds little utility for consultants seeking out undecided or swing voters – some of whom, the president of a political advertising agency posits, "regularly tune out anything that's in the echo chamber … so you have to figure out a way of really disassociating yourself from politics to try to get their attention in the first place." One interviewee, the member of a presidential campaign's advertising team, lamented that such polarization had basically delegitimized many otherwise useful news sources as potential reference points in his ads.

One additional perception of the new media environment – and the efforts outlined here to manage it – might also be noted: the increasingly pervasive sense that, as the newspaper industry crumbles, turnover saps institutional knowledge in newsrooms, and reporters find themselves stretched too thin, consultants might be able to fill the vacuum of investigative journalism with their own opposition research packages. Part of this is because, for instance, if a general assignment reporter is now picking up the work of what had formerly been a dedicated statehouse scribe, that requires "a lot more education of the media by folks on my side," the deputy communications director for a national party explained – "education," of course, being polite code for "spin." But, more significant than that, a direct mail and opposition research president pointed out, reporters are being asked to do in a few days' time what it might have taken campaign staffers a few months' time to compile – and what might be a liability for democracy can be turned into a partisan advantage:

> You used to be able to kind of pitch an idea to a reporter and they would do their research and they would write their article. Well, now, you have to prepackage

> everything and hand it to them and that's the way it's kind of evolved. I mean, it's good for my business, because campaigns can't rely on reporters to do their research for them – they need to hire folks to do it, because that's the only way it's going to get done now.

Narrowcasting the Political Message

For those consultants veteran enough to fondly recall its simplicity, the pre-1980s broadcast era was a time when "you could literally roadblock communications," as one strategic firm's president put it, by buying time on the three major networks, ensuring that "everybody watching TV was seeing the message," but that "now, that's virtually impossible to do." Yet for all the hype surrounding digital segmentation and targeting in the 2012 cycle, conversations with many consultants revealed that they saw these opportunities as but the latest outgrowth in a consistent trajectory toward niche media. One president of a political advertising agency pointed out that his firm has, for many years, sent out as many as 15-20 pieces of different mail on behalf of a client, because, for example, "they know that this guy is interested in sports, fishing, or he owns a gun or this person over here is a soft moderate that is a soft Republican we need to win over." The advent of cable was recalled as a watershed foreshadowing further development of this unique messaging; he described how they could then "cherry-pick to certain audiences," running education policy appeals on the Lifetime network, for example, to women in a single city's suburbs. By the 1990s, with e-mail becoming more widespread, the capacity to drill down on single-issue advocacy became more robust, one U.S. senate press secretary illustrated:

> If you have a group of people who like guns on e-mail, it's easy to just blast a message out to them on, like, they who like guns. We do a lot of things like that that mainstream media might not pick up on – so, like, we do a lot of interviews with Hispanic media; a lot of interviews with Christian websites; a lot of interviews with hard-core conservative media online.

In that sense, as another congressional press secretary confirmed, segmented media opportunities have been around for a "long time," if you count how he would "emphasize different things when talking to a reporter from *National Review* … [compared] to National Public Radio," but "online media … have just made that 100 or 1,000 times more [feasible] with outlets along those lines and more volume along those lines." Because of that, one strategic media consultant revealed, the first touch-point in reaching out on a particular issue might not ideally be *The New York Times* or *Washington Post*, a few of the dominant agenda setters of old, but rather a specific website that tracks the issue closely to generate blogosphere and re-tweeting momentum more "organically," which can then filter upward to those mainstream gatekeepers.

The existence of narrowcasting traditions throughout previous decades should not, however, minimize the enthusiasm heard vocalized for refinements in the process in the latest cycle. Keenly aware that "the line is becoming blurred between the computer screen and your television screen," one analyst at a media buying firm noted, consultants are eager to serve more geographically and even "psychographically" targeted online advertisements. Likely the chief advancement in the 2012 cycle to that end was in "cookie-ing" the voter file, which a small handful of companies had achieved in combining national voter rolls with "anonymous" data warehouse packages containing

demographic and lifestyle information associated with browsing histories (from, say, Amazon, eBay, and WebMD), so as to deliver more personalized messages online. Others point to the increasing digital utility being plumbed in zip code precision – as found on Pandora or YouTube, where one online advertising firm's president touted capturing almost 50,000 views for a hit piece in a single congressional district. The voter file is also increasingly being overlaid with cable systems, such that candidates can avoid buying ad inventory in "uselessly" partisan neighborhoods, the media buying analyst said: "If I have the ability to target specific voters [like that], it's worth approximately twice to four times because it's cutting out a population that I just don't want to talk to." As one strategic media consultant told me:

> It's that much more precise to the point that they not only know what your tastes and interests are; they know enough about your tastes and interests and proclivities and inclinations that, if I'm a union guy and … [I] may not be … especially supportive of gay rights, it's not going to be a gay canvasser who calls me. It's going to be a union guy who calls me or visits me or drops me an e-mail.

The question for future elections is how this increasingly granular detail about the audience for a political message might alter the nature of its content and reorient the creative process toward more flexible output. If you are, for instance, "someone from Florida who likes Sarah Palin, who loves motorcycles and shooting guns – you can cater a message straight to them," said the press secretary for a former U.S. senate leader. Moreover, according to a congressional campaign manager, "This allows you to talk about issues that traditionally never would have been talked about in a campaign because it's not something you'd put on television." A targeted advertising firm's managing

director offered a concrete example of this: He delivered online ads to known commuters living within five miles of a 200-mile stretch of highway claiming that his client's opponent would quadruple the tolls if elected. Specifying to interests like that is "the wave of the future," as the head of one presidential digital team claimed; in part, because "people are so willing, whether they know it or not, to share so much personal information online" that "if you have the resources, you can really slice and dice a database to the nth degree."

Part of the peril, however, that accompanies the lure of partisan outlets is maintaining equivocality in how messages are encoded – an equivocality that becomes more difficult to manage the more fragmented (and even individualized) that new media delivery affords, as he described:

> Campaigns are ambiguous because there's always worry that they're talking to people they shouldn't be talking to – so there's always the fear, well, the bad guys can hear me say this, so I'm not going to be too specific. Rather than, 'I'm going to ban gay marriage,' I'm going to talk about the sanctity of marriage. Or instead of talking about abortion, I'm going to talk about protecting the unborn. Or, my favorite – and I did this a lot – instead of talking about protecting the 2nd Amendment or making sure the government doesn't take our guns, we talked about protecting our constitutional rights.

Framing ambiguously is more difficult in a media environment more splintered along partisan lines, where the potential for catering to a narrower electorate niche is heightened and "that message can be taken and blown up nationally and it can blow up in your face as a representation of what you believe," noted one press secretary who served

both a former House and Senate leader: "Whatever you're saying can come back to bite you in a big way … You have to stay ambiguous on the smaller slice of the populations that you're also targeting." (GOP candidate Todd Akin, whose U.S. Senate bid in 2012 was derailed when he spoke of "legitimate rape," surely understands this hazard.) On the plus side, the friendly confines offered by a like-minded ideological outlet, as opposed to a more combative journalistic watchdog, means that consultants can wield surprising influence over the process, as one congressional communications director disclosed:

> Before I put my boss on TV, I have an extended conversation with the producer of the show about what we will and will not consent to be discussing. There are some shows who – they'll say, 'We'd like to have you on to discuss a highway bill that Congress is considering' and you'll say, 'No, the only thing I want to talk about is my energy bill on the floor this week.' And some of them will say, 'Oh, OK, well, that's fine.' … There are some shows that are very friendly – generally, you put them on Fox News, if you're a Republican politician, I can send them our talking points in advance and some suggested questions for the host to ask and that's exactly how the interview will go down.

As the director of a political advertising agency added, "Truthfulness is important, but I tell a lot of first-time candidates, when you're doing an interview, you're not really there to answer the reporter's questions. You're there to get your agenda across."

Some, like the media buying analyst, believe the true potential here is the real-time "testability" that targeted online advertising offers in terms of gauging, mid-campaign, whether one ad persuades and mobilizes better than another: For instance, "This ad works better when we said, for women, when we talked about, the guy said

'legitimate rape' not just saying he wanted to 'blur the lines on rape.'" That kind of granular information can then feed back into the production process, potentially making the advertising output more nimble and narrowing the message further, but also requiring that consultants accommodate lower budget shoots and edits to achieve a wider (if cheaper) range of micro-targetable inventory. An online advertising firm's president describes this rather fittingly as reaching "the end of data, meaning that we have better data now than we have the ability to deliver on that data."

Discussion

At present, an estimated 7,000 professionals now earn all or part of their living on political campaigns in this $6 billion annual industry (Burton & Shea, 2010, p. 9; Issenberg, 2012, p. 4). Notably, as this specialty of the public relations industry has flourished, journalism has weathered a precipitous decline, with newspaper revenues tumbling by more than $20 billion from their peak (Sass, 2010). By the turn of the century, communication strategists outnumbered reporters and some believe "those with the requisite resources to manipulate the democratic system for their advantage have more capability to accomplish that than ever before" (Bennett & Manheim, 2001, p. 284). This is certainly possible, but one key caveat should be emphasized here: This research does not assume nor imply that these consultants definitively have effect on or power over voters. Rather, this takes up their effect on or power over *the media environment* in which political communication now circulates – a vantage point much less studied and one, I believe, requiring the qualitative methodology and rich detail of thick description utilized here. At a juncture of profound technological upheaval, campaign consultants are working to manage the news agenda through means both wider and narrower than

before: in other words, a broader set of mediated portals is contributing to political discourse and, simultaneously, a more circumscribed set of encoded messages is being delivered through them.

As highlighted in the numerous examples in the preceding pages, there are now an expanded array of venues and platforms that consultants can employ to deliver campaign messages. The more that elites rely upon these new channels like online video, niche blogs, and social media, the more it suggests a potential "disintermediation" of traditional gatekeepers from political discourse. To be certain, powerful institutions of "old media" still retain a critical influence in this agenda-setting environment, but they are seen occupying less of a first-order, definitive role and are being "worked around" more ambitiously than ever by strategists. Interviewees articulated ambitions to talk directly *to* voters and constituents rather than *through* conventional mass media intermediaries. Because the Internet represents, in a sense, an infinite news hole – relative to, say, 30 minutes of a nightly news broadcast or "14 column inches" of daily newsprint – there is no limit to the amount of political content needed or desired to fill that space. Consultants are, therefore, eagerly exploring new ways of producing (or co-producing) and disseminating that content themselves. To them, the "mainstream media" is strategized as much for playing "catch up," as it is the starting point for those processes.

A wider array of channels, however, has also meant a "looser" sense of veracity and rigor in those spaces, which can militate both for and against consultants' purposes, depending on the situation. "That pressure on [journalists] to break news, with all these competitors, means that they might take liberties and make assumptions in reporting in a way that they wouldn't have 10 years ago," complained one U.S. senate press secretary.

Others described what they felt to be a "much lower standard" for online content as compared to its print counterpart, as a digital strategy media consultant explained:

> I'll be like, 'How dare you put that up there or say that?' And [reporters are] just like, 'Oh, well, that's just for my blog; that's not like a real thing.' And I'm like, 'Well, a lot of people look at that thing – a lot more than your stupid articles.'

The problem, for them, emerges when the digital first draft of "history's first draft" gets it wrong and, though it might be corrected in a subsequent update, "that first version is still out there first and it'll be picked up and e-mailed around and a lie can get halfway around the world before the truth gets unspooled," said one congressional press secretary. Corrections, these consultants lament, do not seem to proliferate with the same velocity. They shared a sense that the political news space online was being treated as more provisional, temporary, and unfolding – a fluid, "makeshift" context where facts and falsehoods seem to circulate with equal authority. Unlike prime-time network TV or a morning newspaper, online political content has no analogous deadline, which accelerates the pressure to post installments constantly – with sometimes-dubious results for operatives trying to shepherd the news narrative. To some, the concept of factual impartiality itself may well be under assault because of those changed conditions: "The bounds of objectivity are not what they once were," lamented one strategic media consultant. An opposition researcher further remarked:

> [It's become] a he said-she said kind of argument. And that's how the press plays everything. And that's been tremendously detrimental to the political process and it's leading to their death knell, because partisans on both sides want someone to weigh in with: 'This is right and this is wrong.' So, with the lack of the media

> being the judge, partisan fights have come in and said, 'No – this is bullshit. No – they're wrong on this. No – they're lying.' So each side has gravitated to their websites, which tells them their side is right and the other side is wrong.

It is for this reason perhaps that one pollster to the Romney campaign rather infamously remarked during the last election cycle that, "We're not going to let our campaign be dictated by fact-checkers." Curiously, even as there was a massive increase in fact-checking pursuits in 2012 campaign coverage – with more political reporters "shucking the old he-said-she-said formulation" – those "truth squads have had only marginal success in changing the behavior of campaigns" (Scherer, 2012). Consultants may well feel that campaigns *don't* need to be accountable to "independent facts" if voters adrift in a fragmented information environment won't necessarily hold them accountable. For that reason, one direct mail and opposition research head fears that this is a "slippery slope" that could culminate "50 years from now, [where] politics could be this kind of cartoonish reality, where facts don't matter." The evidence here suggests that strategists are, in fact, designing toward an environment like that which could arrive much sooner.

This is not, however, meant to propose that candidates did not try to manipulate the media in earlier eras or that that today's media is somehow more error-prone than in the past. More information *is* available to voters nowadays: much of it accurate, much of it inaccurate. What this research has shown is how campaigns and consultants see their task of designing for selective exposure being influenced by new media change – how they try to work with that news abundance in strategically useful ways. Where there is greater pluralism in terms of those contributing to the national news narrative, there is also, naturally, a more fractured political agenda.

In that sense, the means of managing political news have also gotten narrower. With greater awareness of voter niches, campaigns are developing messages more tailored and refined than mass broadcasting could afford – even as an overwhelming majority of voters say they don't want campaigns to micro-target ads to them based on tracking of their online activity (Vega, 2012). This also points to an interesting tension, as rhetorical ambiguity maintained some advantage in the "mass media" era – with candidates avoiding concrete pledges and being wary of how they framed certain touchy issues. Slogans, for example, were long designed to be "vacuous" and "allow constituents to read what they want into them" (Steger, 1999, p. 676); even when campaigns in the 1990s first had the opportunity to take advantage of online interactivity, they initially resisted for fear of losing control over that tradition of ambiguity (Stromer-Galley, 2000, p. 125).

Now that they can drill down with messages to more partisan populations expecting to hear those definitive stances, that balance of vagueness and specificity is set in greater flux. Consultants have better data to carve out more nuanced audience segments, but might not be able to equivocate so nimbly when addressing them. The "mainstream media" might, therefore, continue to represent the best platform for delivering more centrist, bland boilerplate to swing voters and moderates, while a "subterranean" ecology of individualized contacts and narrowcast partisan venues offers space for more targeted, comparatively extremist proclamations. Issues that might not have been addressed widely and openly might now be tackled through those narrower channels – particularly if the advertising output can flexibly improvise thanks to digital feedback mechanisms gathering mid-campaign audience reactions.

Finally, it is revealing to examine that "spatial" understanding that consultants have of agenda setting in a multi-tiered news environment, particularly as new media vehicles on the political "fringe" are enlisted – as decentralized nodes of power – in the service of swaying the mainstream press narrative and conventional wisdom. For consultants, an older model that upheld a comparatively "top down," monopolistic influence of traditional gatekeepers is morphing into something more unpredictable and "bottom up." By planting content and fomenting issues in spaces that marginalize those gatekeepers' front-line authority, strategists might drive stories from the periphery to the center – cultivating an appearance of "grassroots" momentum among partisan venues like blogs and social media. This makes campaign strategies, practices, and messages much more complex and fluid than those of a generation ago.

Conclusions

> There's not a referee anymore … We're not operating off the same set of facts. It used to be that all voters watched one of the three different newscasts every night and they were largely operating off the same set of facts. That's not the case anymore … Republicans and Democrats are sort of different, you know – they're different people in sort of a variety of ways … Ways they look at and approach the world are different and now you're just seeing media that is catering to the fact that we don't have a common canon of facts anymore. We don't have a common canon of like: 'This is what's going on.'

The lament of this U.S. senate campaign manager is an ironic one, for consultants like him have, in fact, been instrumental in designing a public sphere toward those fractured ends. As caveated earlier, his declaration of voter effect (i.e., "Republicans and

Democrats are different" because of that fragmentation) should not be taken at face value as proven by this research for this was not the intention; this has been a study of the social constructions of new media environments by operative elites, not empirical outcomes on audiences and citizens. This investigation has offered a rare "backstage" glimpse of the production and encoding of political communication as technological advances restructure those strategies, practices, and messages. These changes have altered the way that consultants are exploiting new media "stratementation," or the selective exposure to (and "individual reality construction" from) expanded options for political information, which could, in turn, exacerbate partisan polarization (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008, pp. 717, 722). It has long been argued that individuals seek out political content consistent with preexisting biases; this research begins to illuminate how consultant elites deliberately cater to that "information divide" amidst media change. The concluding critique here, therefore, tackles only the *potential* outcome of those methods for American democracy, based upon what has been learned from in-depth interviews with those who scheme with these goals in mind (and hold the power to reshape our political communication ecology to those ends). If these consultants are successful in their efforts, I believe it threatens to endanger the common culture and factual objectivity that undergirds the public sphere ideal (Habermas, 1989).

Others have voiced this complaint before, albeit without the insight of backstage data provided here in the most updated form. For example, Michael Gurevitch, Stephen Coleman, and Jay Blumler (2009) worried for the emergence of "distinct issue publics: people who only want to be addressed on their own terms in relation to issues that matter to them" (p. 170). Oscar Gandy (2001) has written of how this segmentation and

targeting is anti-inclusive (particularly toward non-voters) and subverts the Habermasian model of informed deliberation. Thus, if "the first hurdle for any political targeter is deciding who to leave out of such an effort," we might anticipate more efforts toward demobilizing exclusion in the future (Issenberg, 2011). A political media ecology in which citizens hear only what they expect to hear from those they want to deliver it is, by design, system set against any sense of common culture and shared truths: "The civility in our system has eroded because of [this] as these new media have spread like wildfire," said one communication advisor to a presidential campaign. "I think if you were doing a chart, you would see the shrillness and combativeness and polarization of politics has increased as the new media has increased."

This is, of course, empirically testable by future research. We can, at this point, though, state that consultants' efforts to build such a fragmented, data-refined communication experience does not have, as its goal, diversity and circulation in terms of the opportunities for citizens to encounter their political and cultural opposites. Lacking any reservoir of good will toward opponents to draw upon – a reservoir filled, in part, by consuming common information sources – the perils of such polarization are rife, particularly when political leaders need to inevitably compromise with what could become an unknowable "Other" across the aisle (earning them the enmity of constituents already "stratemented" against each other). Producing for information cocoons online, coupled with the decline of mass media newspapers and TV networks – and consultants increasingly doing the research for reporters – could further splinter the "agenda setting" model into more of an "*agendas* setting" model, as one director at a political ad agency feared: "When everybody only had three places to go, you had a common set of

conveyance for how people processed stuff." It is probably not surprising that, in this emergent environment, three-quarters of Mitt Romney supporters believed that Barack Obama was "intentionally misleading" voters and the exact same share of Obama partisans believed likewise of Romney (Scherer, 2012).

This is surely partly because the postmodern purpose of segmentation and targeting is to "deliver 'different – and compelling truths' to precisely the right segments" (Gandy Jr., 2001, p. 144). To be certain, the Habermasian ideal was always just that – more theory than reality in the history of the American republic; research such as this is not meant to imply glorification of a bygone public sphere that never really existed in practice. But what this study does illuminate is how campaign operatives labor to manage political discourse and news agenda(s) in ways antithetical to those ideals, given the opportunities and challenges that new media technologies afford. If consultants have their way in shaping that environment on behalf of clients, a "common canon of… 'what's going on'" will be ever more difficult for citizens to access.

It has been shown here how political communication professionals utilize increasingly sophisticated data to design texts and exploit spaces within a more fragmented, partisan media environment. The consequences of those efforts include a direct assault on many of the ideals of the public sphere. These may well lead to campaign wins for individual candidates, but they could also portend eventual losses for the machinery of democracy. The new media designs of these stage managers presage a campaign production apparatus that is more decentralized, flexible, and segmented and imperils traditional gatekeepers of information and communication, for better and worse.

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Endnotes

[1] Participants have been stripped of identifying information to protect their anonymity: Press secretary, U.S. Representative; Press secretary, Presidential candidate; Managing director, Targeted digital advertising firm; Advertising consultant, Media consulting firm; Communications director, U.S. Representative; Press secretary, U.S. Senator; President, Opposition research firm; Executive vice president, Strategic consulting firm; President, Political advertising agency; Media consultant, Digital strategy firm; Press secretary, U.S. Senator; Deputy chief of staff, U.S. Representative; President, Digital strategy and online advertising firm; Deputy communications director, National party committee; President, Direct mail and opposition research firm; President, Political advertising agency; President, Media consulting firm; Opposition research partner, Political consulting firm; Political director, Political advertising agency; President, Media consulting firm; Senior speechwriter, U.S. President; Analyst, Media buying firm; President, Direct mail political advertising agency; Media consultant, Strategic communications firm; Vice president, Digital strategy firm; President, Political advertising agency; President, Strategic consulting firm; President, Media consulting firm; Partner, Digital strategy firm; President, Political advertising agency; Partner, Media consulting firm; Chief blogger, Presidential campaign; Strategic media consultant, Political advertising agency; Partner, Social and digital media agency; Chief Internet strategist, Digital strategy firm; Chief creative officer, Media consulting firm; Associate manager for policy, Social networking company; Chief advertising consultant, Presidential candidate