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25. Digital campaigning: how digital media change the work of parties and campaign organizations and impact elections

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1 DIGITAL CAMPAIGNING IN THE WORK OF PARTIES AND CAMPAIGN ORGANIZATIONS

Digital media have come to play an important role in the work of political parties and campaign organizations all over the world. Examples for the use of digital media in the United States (US) like Barack Obama's presidential campaigns of 2008 and 2012 and Donald Trump's campaign of 2016 dominate the public imagination. At the same time, it is important to recognize that the uses of digital media in politics vary considerably depending on campaign contexts or resources. This demands for the analysis of the use of digital media by parties and campaign organizations in varying temporal and international contexts instead of expecting the examples from the US to apply globally.

The focus of this chapter lies on the discussion of how digital media have impacted the work of political parties, especially the way they run political campaigns. Political parties are at the heart of democracies and although they face persistent challenges regarding membership and public trust, they are crucial institutions connecting the people with political elites and the government (Dalton et al., 2011). This renders the impact of digital media on parties' ability to connect with voters one of the crucial channels through which digital media impact democracy (Jungherr et al., 2020, pp. 158–178).

Digital media have a strong impact on politics beyond parties. They have changed the work of non-governmental organizations (Bimber et al., 2012; Karpf, 2012), extended the toolkits and repertoires available to activists and protestors (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Earl & Kimport, 2011; Jackson et al., 2020), and provided new forms of political participation (Theocharis & van Deth, 2018). These are important changes. But the specific institutional, organizational, and participatory characteristics of political parties deviate strongly from these other political organizations and forms of political participation. This makes the analysis and discussion about the role and impact of digital media in the work of political parties an important topic in its own right. Of course, this does not mean that the patterns identified in the broader discussion on the impact of digital media on political organization, participation, and activism do not also inform the study of political parties.

By now, digital tools available to parties, elites, and people in their pursuit of politics and political information have reached a staggering variety. In the past, it was possible to discuss the role of 'the internet' in politics, 'social media', or specific services like Facebook or Twitter. Today, the variety of available services and their differentiated uses and functions challenges these unified approaches. Instead, I will use the term 'digital media' in order to capture the breadth of this phenomenon in the work of political parties. Here, I follow the

definition by Jungherr et al. (2020, pp. 7–8): digital media are ‘institutions and infrastructures that produce and distribute information encoded in binary code’.

The chapter will proceed with a discussion of some of the dominant theoretical and empirical approaches to the study of digital campaigning. Following this, the chapter will use a framework focused on campaign functions for the discussion of digital campaigning: the impact of digital media on organizational structures and work routines, resource collection and allocation, achieving presence in communication spaces and reach to audiences of interest, and the use of digital media as a symbol for professionalism and innovation of parties and their candidates. Finally, the chapter will sketch persistent challenges to the academic investigation of the uses of digital media for political parties and their effects on campaigns and present promising perspectives for future research.

2 HOW DO WE KNOW?

Before we proceed, it is important to ask how scientists know about the role of digital media in political parties and effects on campaigning. This will show that we as a field know very little about these questions and what we appear to know does not necessarily stand on the firmest ground.

In recent years, we have seen many studies examining the use of digital media through parties. Yet, while the study count might be high and steadily increasing, these studies tell us little about the strategic use of digital media, their organizational embedding, or their actual effects in the pursuit of campaigning goals. The literature faces systematic challenges both regarding theory and the establishment of empirical evidence.

One reason for this surprising state is that studies often approach the use of digital media by parties and campaigns from distinctly unpolitical perspectives. For example, early studies approached the use of campaign websites by counting features, such as the presence of hyperlinks or contact options (Foot & Schneider, 2006). These signals served as operationalizations of concepts supposedly characteristic of digital communication, such as ‘interactivity’. The analysis of political uses of digital media thus starts out as the search for characteristics associated with digital communication. The question thus is not how political actors use digital media to further their political goals but instead how digital communication starts to shape and change political communication. This early logic still permeates many contemporary studies approaching the use of digital media by political actors through their use of features of digital tools supposedly signalling authenticity, bottom-up mobilization, deliberation, or interactivity.

Another strand in the literature examines whether the use of digital media by political actors corresponds with a ‘normalization’ of digital politics or a ‘revolution’ of politics through digital media. Normalization is here understood as established political power dynamics and communication styles starting to dominate digital communication environments as well. In contrast, revolution speaks of new political powers and communication styles to emerge in digital communication environments and over time to transform politics as such. While still a popular framing device for studies, the normalization-revolution debate tells us little about actual uses of digital media and their impact on practices and work routines in political organizations and their effects on campaigns (Jungherr et al., 2020, pp. 240–244). For one, the bar of what degree of change constitutes a revolution is contested, thereby leading different researchers to take the same evidence as support for normalization or revolution depending on

their priors (Wright, 2012). Second, the time frame of changes is disputed with most studies taking a predominantly presentist perspective. This can lead scholars to treat the emergence of new political actors, such as the #Occupy protests or the various European Pirate Parties, as evidence for a digital revolution of politics, while in hindsight of a few years the actual impact of these new actors turned out to be limited and they themselves were somewhat short-lived (Jungherr et al., 2020, pp. 244–245).

What passes in these approaches as theory usually does not go beyond labelling the emergence of a specific practice or the use of specific tools or features as evidence of a supposed trend. Theories stating causal relationships or mechanisms are rare in this literature. Accordingly, these studies are best understood as descriptive rather than explanatory accounts of the uses of digital media for parties and in campaigning. They tell us a lot and in detail about the uses of specific practices, tools, and features at specific points in time but little about causes, effects, or processes.

Beyond a lack of theory, the field faces empirical challenges too. For one, many studies rely predominantly, if not exclusively, on the analysis of digital artifacts of campaign activity – such as websites, tweets, Facebook posts, or YouTube videos. What is generally missing is a meaningful follow-up involving campaign professionals or party officials allowing for the identification of their motives for or assessments of the uses of digital media. Also lacking are studies with explicit evaluative designs allowing for the identification of actual effects of digital media. Thereby, the respective studies end up telling us more about the expectation of researchers regarding the uses of digital media than the expectations of political professionals or their effects on campaigns. At the same time, as we have seen above, researchers' expectations often do not account for specific goals of political actors or functions of digital media in their pursuit but are based on much more general expectations regarding the nature or effects of digital media as such.

Some of the richest narratives on the use of digital media by campaign organizations or parties stem from accounts of either participants and consultants (Bond & Exley, 2016; Pearlman, 2012; Therriault, 2016; Trippi, 2004) or journalists (Edelman, 2020; Issenberg, 2012; Madrigal, 2012). While these accounts offer rich information, their authors invariably are trying to sell their audience exciting narratives about the decisive uses of digital media in politics. Accordingly, they need to be interrogated critically by academics. Failure to do so can lead to the emergence of folk theories about the power of digital media in politics that prove surprisingly resilient even when faced with mounting contradicting evidence. Examples for this are the ill-founded claims about the decisive impact of Cambridge Analytica on the US presidential campaign of Donald Trump in 2016 (Jungherr et al., 2020, pp. 124–130). This highlights the risks of relying uncritically on the accounts of insiders or journalists when it comes to understanding the role of digital media for political actors and their effects.

Recently, there has been emerging a literature informed by the sociology of organizations and ethnographic research practices that provides rich insights on the practices and consequences of the use of digital media by campaign organizations and parties. Until now, however, this literature has focused predominantly on US campaigns, specifically the campaigns of the Democratic Party between 2004 and 2016 (Baldwin-Philippi, 2015; Hersh, 2015; Kreiss, 2012b, 2016a; Nielsen, 2012). Analyses in other countries or systematic comparisons are still very rare. As a result, there are severe holes in our knowledge of digital campaigning outside of the US or even within the US (like campaigns of the Republican Party or non-presidential campaigns).

Previous research suffers also from gaps in terms of methodology. The most insightful works in recent years have been very successful in mobilizing observational approaches – such as embedded participatory observation (Baldwin-Philippi, 2015; Nielsen, 2012) or interview-based organizational ethnography (Dommett et al., 2020a, 2020b; Jungherr, 2016b; Kreiss, 2012b, 2016a; McKenna & Han, 2014) – or meta-accounts based on academic, journalistic, and participant accounts (Stromer-Galley, 2019). Very few studies try to identify the actual reach and effects of digital media in party campaigns quantitatively (Bimber & Copeland, 2013; Copeland & Bimber, 2015; Hersh, 2015). Specifically, we lack research designs that employ randomized controlled trials for testing for the causal impact of specific digital media in the use by campaigns. For example, with respect to persuasion or mobilization we would like to know about the effectiveness of digital approaches – as for example data intensive targeting – compared to other approaches. Randomized controlled trials have been proven to be highly effective in campaign research (Green & Gerber, 2015) but also challenging to implement within actual campaigns of political parties (Foos & John, 2018; Wuttke et al., 2019).

The available evidence thus leaves us with deep narratives of some political campaigns – predominantly campaigns run by the Democratic Party in pursuit of the US presidency – and some idea of what participants, consultants, and journalists like to talk about regarding digital media and politics. However, our understanding is seriously limited when it comes to the actual uses of digital media in campaigns beyond these narrow cases, the actual effects of digital media in campaigning or specific goals within it (such as mobilization or persuasion), or the differential benefits of the use of digital tools (for example in targeting efforts) compared to other established approaches. Far from ideal, this offers a starting point for a larger and more systematic international research effort regarding these questions.

3 FOUR FUNCTIONS OF DIGITAL CAMPAIGNING

To understand digital campaigning we need to consider, first, the functions digital media serve for political parties and campaign organizations (Jungherr et al., 2020, pp. 1–29). Political parties and campaign organizations use digital media in order to pursue a set of very specific goals: to increase the efficiency of their organizational structures and practices, for resource collection and allocation, to ensure presence in the public arena and reach to specific audiences, and as a symbol to represent professionalism and innovativeness of parties and their candidates (Jungherr, 2016b).

3.1 Organizational Structures and Work Routines

Digital media have impacted parties and campaign organizations in their organizational structure and their work routines. Here, we find two areas of interest: the impact of digital media on existing parties and campaign organizations of established political groups and the emergence of new parties enabled through opportunities provided by digital media.

In existing party organizations, we find varying degrees of adaptation to the requirements and opportunities of digital media. For example, in Germany – a country in which political parties still can rely on central organizations providing strategic planning and organizational support – large parties have adapted to digital media by the establishment of new specialist

organizational departments while smaller parties have integrated digital media within the workflow of existing departments (Jungherr, 2016b). In the US campaigns are run through dedicated organizations formed around candidates who first compete within the party for the nomination before entering the competition with candidates of other parties. Therefore, campaign organizations are highly flexible in optimizing their structure to new campaign trends or candidate types. It is no surprise to find that here, digital media have had a stronger impact on campaign structures and personnel. Specialists in the use of digital tools have become ever more central in the organizational structures of campaigns and have started to become part of the campaign elite. At the same time, they have become crucial contributors to decisions on how to allocate resources, evaluate activities, and produce campaign content (Kreiss, 2012b, 2016a). Yet, it is unclear whether this development mainly holds for highly resource-intensive campaigns, such as presidential races, or will over time also come to matter for more resource-starved races. For example, in the United Kingdom a study finds highly varying practices in the adoption of digital tools at the party grassroots (Dommett et al., 2020b). In general, digital media have become crucial for the daily working practices of non-elite campaign workers all over the world. This is especially true for ‘mundane’ tools – such as email (Epstein & Broxmeyer, 2020; Nielsen, 2011). These shifts are easy to forget but maybe matter more than the adaption of the hottest app of the moment.

The differences between countries indicate that the impact and uses of digital media seem to depend on contextual factors of party and campaign organizations. The strong party organizations in European countries face different organizational challenges and opportunities in their adoption of digital media from the weak party organizations in the US. While strong organizational structures allow learning within organizations with relatively high continuity of personnel and structures over time, weak organizations need to rely more heavily on broad networks for allowing learning over time and maintaining institutional memory. The question of organizational learning in parties and campaign organizations is highly interesting and relevant but one the field is only beginning to address (Kreiss, 2016a; Kreiss & Jasinski, 2016; Kreiss & Saffer, 2017).

At the same time, digital media have also emerged as an important enabling factor in the emergence of new parties – so called cyber, digital, or platform parties. Digital media provide people and movements with tools allowing them to coordinate, elicit feedback, mobilize, organize, and create public visibility allowing new organizations to emerge (Margetts, 2001, 2006). Some have seen a connection between the supposed participatory and democratic characteristics of digital media and utopian political goals of the political left (Gerbaudo, 2019). This initial assessment seemed plausible for as long as new digitally enabled parties predominantly were on the left political spectrum, such as the European Pirate Parties (Almqvist, 2016; Deseriis, 2020), the Spanish Unidas Podemos (Casero-Ripollés et al., 2016), or the Italian Movimento 5 Stelle (Deseriis, 2020; Natale & Ballatore, 2014). More recently, a growing count of new parties and movements on the political right rely on digital media, such as Germany’s Alternative für Deutschland. Instead of enabling consistently the political left, digital media seem to enable political challengers by providing the organizational resources to mount a challenge to the political status quo be it from the left or the right (Jungherr et al., 2019). What these cases undoubtably show, though, is the potential of digital media for the internal organization and coordination of parties and campaigns (Dommett, 2020).

3.2 Resource Collection and Allocation

For parties running political campaigns digital media have also come to play a very important role as channels for resource collection and as sources of information about how to best allocate resources. As of now, this has been maybe most pronounced in Barack Obama's presidential campaigns in 2008 and 2012 where information collected and analysed through digital tools was so central to the decision making in the campaigns that researcher Daniel Kreiss coined the term 'computational management' (Kreiss, 2012b). One reason for the centrality of digital media for political organizations in the US lies in their ability to generate and channel political donations (Hindman, 2005; Kreiss, 2012b, 2016a). As donations are less important in other political systems (Anstead, 2008; Jungherr, 2016b), the influence of digital media and the specialists implementing them has remained significantly lower in other countries.

Besides in the generation of donations, digital media are also a very important element in the mobilization and coordination of volunteers. Various US primary and presidential campaigns from Howard Dean (Kreiss, 2012b; Trippi, 2004), through Barack Obama (Cogburn & Espinoza-Vasquez, 2011; Kreiss, 2012b, 2016a; McKenna & Han, 2014; Nielsen, 2012), to Bernie Sanders (Bond & Exley, 2016; Kreiss, 2019) have used digital media actively to generate and channel enthusiasm among supporters within the party organization and translate it into volunteer work, such as telephone or door-to-door canvassing. At the same time, channelling the enthusiasm of activists into a more structured campaign organization can prove to be challenging. Activists and volunteers often pursue politically more pure or extreme goals than official campaigns feel comfortable with in wanting to appeal to the general electorate (Enos & Hersh, 2015; Jungherr, 2012b; Trippi, 2004).

Digital media allow campaign organizations and parties to identify promising supporters. By using dedicated organizing platforms, they can turn supporters into volunteers while at the same time being able to steer and monitor their efforts (Pearlman, 2012). Digital media therefore serve an important coordination and control function for political organizations. This has somewhat been lost in public debate, where there is a strong focus on romanticizing so-called digitally enabled bottom-up or grassroots volunteerism. But as more precise accounts of volunteer-driven campaign organization have shown, there is much more coordination, training, and monitoring from central organizational structures going into these organizations than meets the eye (Han, 2014; McKenna & Han, 2014). These practices have travelled internationally, with either US firms branching out their services and platforms originally developed for campaigns in the US to other countries (McKelvey & Piebiak, 2018) or parties or local firms developing dedicated platforms optimized for local campaign contexts which often vary regarding what type of data can be collected or fed into these platforms (Jungherr, 2016a).

Even more at the fore of public debate is the role of data-driven campaigning (Jungherr et al., 2020, pp. 179–211). The term collects campaign practices that use large data sets and statistical models to guide campaign activity and resource allocation, for example in identifying and contacting likely voters. For some, these practices have even come to define contemporary campaigns. Yet, looking closely at the extent of these efforts and what little is known about their effects should generate some pause for anyone claiming the future of campaigning lies in data-driven practices. Especially US campaigns have been known to use data to decide which potential voters and donors to contact given their expected propensity to be mobilized to vote, persuaded by a message, or likely to donate (Nickerson & Rogers, 2014). These efforts have been discussed most extensively in the context of the two presidential campaigns of Barack

Obama in 2008 and 2012 (Kreiss, 2012b, 2016a) and through popular journalistic accounts over time have come to reach mythical heights of electoral effectiveness (Issenberg, 2012; Madrigal, 2012). Yet, a closer look at the mechanics and practices of data-driven targeting shows its limits as well as its potential.

For one, some data – such as basic identity or contact information – are crucial for campaigns to reach voters, for example through mailings or telephone calls. Any support in collecting these data and keeping them current, for example through dedicated software solutions, are of great help to any campaign in organizing their voter outreach. Beyond this, further data points are available to campaigns depending on the specific privacy laws governing the use of data in politics. In the US, for example, campaigns can buy or collect many data points on individuals; in Germany, in contrast, campaigns can buy or collect comparatively few. But the sheer number of data points alone is not decisive. Instead, it matters if and how strongly data documenting individual traits and behaviour relates to electorally relevant behaviour, such as turnout or partisan support. This distinction gets lost in the myth of data-driven campaigning, which expects data-driven practices to transform all aspects of campaigning irrespective of context (Baldwin-Philippi, 2017). We encounter this myth in the accounts of many consultants and journalists, emphasizing the perceived power of large data sets to inform on people's political behaviour (Simon, 2019). Recently, this has been famously discussed in the context of the supposed targeting of Facebook ads by the consultancy firm Cambridge Analytica during the 2016 US presidential bid of Donald Trump (Jungherr et al., 2020, pp. 124–130). But if we are looking closely at the mechanics of the underlying models it is highly unlikely that even in comparatively data-rich campaign environments – such as the US – data allow robust inferences about people's electoral behaviour. For one, many studies have shown that in the US it is not the large data files provided by commercial data vendors or social media companies that contribute to the precision of voter outreach but instead data provided and maintained by the state: the official voter files. In the US the information provided by voter files to campaign organization varies in granularity, but often contains information on people's party affiliation and participation in local, state, or federal elections (Ansolabehere & Hersh, 2014; Igielnik et al., 2018). It has been shown that traits and behaviours that are of interest to campaigns but not provided in voter files can only be inferred very imprecisely from other data sources (Hersh, 2015). This is especially true regarding psychological traits and their connection with political attitudes or voting intention supposedly identified through 'psychometric targeting' based on social media data (Confessore & Hakim, 2017; Hersh, 2018; Karpf, 2017). The perceived precision of data-driven targeting is therefore doubtful. Similarly, the actual degree to which even US-based campaigns are using data-driven practices has been challenged by studies looking closely at actual campaign practices rather than press releases, accounts by campaigners and consultants, or breathless media coverage (Baldwin-Philippi, 2017; Karpf, 2016b; Kroll, 2018; Sides & Vavreck, 2014). This goes double for international campaigns that find themselves in legal environments much less permissive in terms of data privacy than the US (Anstead, 2017; Dommett, 2019; Jungherr, 2016a, 2016b; Kruschinski & Haller, 2017). Campaigns and parties might talk about their use of data-driven practices but their actual uses and the effectiveness render these approaches a much less crucial element in campaigns than popular belief has it. Inspecting closely the role of data in campaigns, thus, shows that the management of voter outreach through digital campaign platforms plays a much more important role in campaigning than the elusive hopes pinned on perceived precision of data-driven targeting of voters (Jungherr, 2016a).

Finally, campaigns and politicians employ digital media to gain insights into public opinion or message testing. Publicly voiced reactions to politics on social networking sites such as Facebook or Twitter are used as informal cues to assess public opinion (Anstead & O'Loughlin, 2015; Chadwick, 2017; Hamby, 2013; Karpf, 2016a; Kreiss & McGregor, 2019; McGregor, 2020). The quality of the respective insights needs to be taken with more than the proverbial grain of salt. Public social media contributions have repeatedly been shown as not being representative of public opinion and not corresponding with levels of political support. Instead, they point to attention toward politics by a politically highly invested public (Jungherr et al., 2016, 2017). While there certainly is some insight to be gained from data like these, they are probably far from the 'cheap' survey substitute that some journalists, politicians, or consultants may hope to have found.

This also illustrates the value of taking a function- and context-driven approach to the analysis of digital media and campaigning. A classic modernization or professionalization account would look at the repertoire of tools and services in use by parties or campaigns and chalk up any deviation from repertoires or usage patterns deviating from US campaigns as being deficient or a case of belated development on the temporal trajectory toward the US campaign blueprint. In contrast, in the function- and context-driven approach context conditions dictate what functions digital media can serve for specific parties. Taking Germany, for example, the comparatively small role of grassroots funding in the campaigns of large parties leads them to invest less in the development of digital tools supporting and optimizing donation acquisition. Accordingly, digital specialists do not rise as fast to leading functions in campaigns and parties, which slows down other uses of digital media. Similarly, restrictive data privacy laws limit the abilities of parties to collect, buy, or reuse data on voters which in turn limits the role of and investment in data-driven practices severely. Both these outcomes are not driven by limited appreciation or understanding of the role of technology in campaigning but instead are determined by a cost-benefit analysis of the functions digital tools can serve for parties and campaigns given their specific contextual environment and goals.

3.3 Achieving Presence in the Information Space and Reach

One of the most important challenges of political parties and campaigns is to ensure their presence in contemporary information environments. In the past, they could rely on traditional mass media to carry their message to the public but at a time of fracturing audiences, a myriad of different news outlets, and plenty of opportunity for people disinterested in politics to avoid the news, this is not enough. Parties and campaigns need to adapt to the digital transformation of the public arena (Jungherr & Schroeder, 2021a) in order to achieve presence in information spaces (Jungherr et al., 2020, pp. 30–68) and to reach the public (Jungherr et al., 2020, pp. 69–102).

As parties and campaigns cannot rely anymore exclusively on traditional media to ensure their presence in information spaces, they must become information providers themselves and achieve distribution through new and alternative media providers and channels. Consequently, we find the gatekeeping power of traditional mass media further weakened (Bimber, 2003; Wilhelm, 2000). This can lead to a healthy and more pluralistic extension of the types of information and opinions represented in the public arena but also to the challenge of the status quo through extremist or exclusionary actors, which previously would have found themselves

excluded from the public arena by mass media exercising their gatekeeping power (Jungherr et al., 2019).

Parties and campaigns have answered the challenges of transformed communication environments by becoming information providers themselves. For this purpose, they use dedicated web presences, such as websites or social media profiles (Vaccari, 2013), as well as targeted approaches, such as email or online ads (Epstein & Broxmeyer, 2020; Fowler et al., 2020; Ridout et al., 2021a, 2021b). As a result, parties and campaigns may establish dedicated news desks that produce dedicated multimedia content optimized for distribution through varying digital media channels. In the extreme, parties and campaigns may establish or spawn nominally independent but clearly allied research or media units that produce content designed to influence the coverage of traditional news organizations. The Government Accountability Institute is one example from the US presidential campaign in 2016: a research unit with no official connection to the Republican Party but financed by important Republican donors and thereby clearly part of the larger Republican network. The group produced a dossier collecting unfavourable information and rumours about the finances of then Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton and her husband and former US president Bill Clinton. The resulting dossier, *Clinton Cash*, became a *New York Times* bestseller and influenced the media coverage of the candidate for the run of the campaign (Green, 2017, pp. 177–189). While this is an extreme example, parties and campaigns routinely try to influence the coverage of traditional and alternative media through specifically designed content, events, or outreach. This can also take the form of interacting with bloggers, influencers, or social media users to prompt them to cover specific aspects of the campaign in the hope that this will attract coverage by traditional media. In other words, they use digital tools to indirectly influence the communication environment during a campaign (Karpf, 2010; Kreiss, 2016b). This process is facilitated by traditional media's willingness to incorporate information found on blogs, YouTube, or on Twitter in their coverage (Anstead & O'Loughlin, 2015; Chadwick, 2017; McGregor, 2019).

In distributing information, parties and campaigns also rely on digital platforms, for example in the form of ads targeted to specific audience segments (Cotter et al., 2021; Fowler et al., 2020; Ridout et al., 2021a, 2021b). We have encountered this use of digital media already in the previous section on data-driven campaigning. As discussed, the perceived precision and manipulative potential of data-driven targeting might be exaggerated in public discourse and perception. Still, by allowing campaigns to reach specific audience segments – such as groupings based on age, location, or general interests – digital ad-based targeting equips political actors with a tool to reach parts of the public otherwise invisible to them at comparatively low cost. This ensures the visibility of parties and campaigns in an increasingly fragmented information environment. The growing importance of this form of informational reach in the US led the Trump campaign in 2016 to collaborate closely with platform companies relying on their advice on how best to pursue their campaign goals. This has given rise to questions as to the role and responsibility of platform companies in politics and the growing dependence of parties and campaign organizations on them (Kreiss & McGregor, 2018).

Taken together, the transformation of the public arena, the weakening influence of traditional gatekeepers over political discourse, and the way parties and campaigns have started to adapt has given rise to fears about the integrity of political communication environments and their vulnerability toward misinformation and manipulation (Bennett & Livingston, 2021). But a close look at the available literature reveals that such concerns are not yet grounded on solid evidence of large-scale societal effects or threats. Instead, they might be best understood

as a reaction to widespread societal uncertainty driven by unfamiliarity with the emerging phenomena, patterns, and actors (Jungherr & Schroeder, 2021b).

3.4 Digital Media Use as Symbols

Political parties and campaign organizations may use digital media also as symbols signifying their professionalism, innovativeness, cultural relevance, and candidate's skill (Jungherr, 2016b). The public use of digital media by parties and campaigns has come to matter in the performance of politics in a variety of ways. This includes the use of specific digital media and practices primarily to have them included in the public narrative of the campaign, the use of data in campaigns, the explicit use of cyber-rhetoric to talk about a politician or a campaign, choosing a dialogue-oriented style in digital communication, the attempt to provide audiences with the impression of authenticity, and the conscious adoption of communication practices found in online culture.

Digital media feature strongly in the work of political parties and campaigns going back at least to the 1990s. While digital media clearly contribute to important campaigning tasks, they also serve a rhetorical function. Examining US campaigns closely shows that they adopt new digital services and technology even if it remains uncertain if and how they contribute effectively to campaign activities. Yet, each campaign puts their use of digital media front and centre in their public relations activity and links them to the public narrative of what they are trying to achieve (Stromer-Galley, 2019). At the same time, these accounts remain suspiciously opaque in providing robust evidence for the actual uses of digital technology and their impact on campaign functions, such as voter outreach or donation acquisition. The public narratives of US campaigning practices and their supposed use of digital media have become highly influential models for international campaigns to imitate. While realizing the deeper potential of digital media and technology depends on an organization's resources and organizational structures, simply adopting the use of selected tools and technologies and publicly talking about their supposed importance in a campaign is comparatively easy. The use of digital media and technology has thereby become an important rhetorical element in international campaigns selling the public image of a candidate, party or campaign. In this, the use of digital tools is independent from their actual contributions to important campaign functions, such as voter outreach or donation drives. Accordingly, researchers and journalists should treat statements by campaign officials or consultants on the transformative impact of digital tools not blindly as true accounts. Instead, they should interrogate them critically on their merits beyond rhetorically advancing the public image of campaigns or consultants.

Currently, one of the most important elements in the public narrative of campaigns are data-driven practices. Beginning with the presidential campaigns of Barack Obama in 2008 and 2012, data-driven practices became a central feature in the self-presentation of US campaigns (Kreiss, 2012b, 2016a; Nickerson & Rogers, 2014), even if the degree of their use and their actual contribution to campaign success remains unclear (Baldwin-Philippi, 2017). After Obama's success in 2012, the use of data-driven practices became a common element in the self-presentations of international campaigns. To take but two examples, during the 2016 EU referendum in the United Kingdom, the 'Vote Leave' campaign emphasized the importance of data and computational modelling in their work (Cummings, 2017), while remaining characteristically vague in presenting evidence of data-driven practices' actual contribution to the efficiency of voter targeting and reach. Even in Germany, a country with famously strict

data privacy laws and a population highly sensitive to issues of data protection (Kruschinski & Haller, 2017), parties publicly emphasize the role of data-driven practices. For example, during the federal election of 2017, the German conservative party (CDU) pushed its use of data in order to drive their door-to-door campaign in public presentations of the campaign (Jungherr, 2016a). While data undoubtedly played a role in these campaigns, given differences in institutional, legal and resource contexts the uses and effects of data-driven approaches varied strongly between these campaigns and the blueprint provided by the Obama campaign (Jungherr, 2016b). Still, irrespective of these differences and the actual impact of data-driven approaches to campaigning success, political operatives shared the conviction that talking about data-driven campaigning in public would positively contribute to their public image. In this, employing and talking about data-driven approaches served a rhetorical function for international campaigns from 2012 onwards.

More generally, parties and campaigns very consciously try to position themselves and their candidates rhetorically in relation to prominent normative narratives and prominent figureheads associated with digital technology. This can be called *cyber-rhetoric*. Examples of this are associations with open-source software culture (Kreiss, 2011, 2012a) or hacker culture (Madrigal, 2012) using related rhetoric or trying to attract endorsements from public intellectuals and entrepreneurs prominent in the development of digital tools. Related to this is the use of specific communication styles deemed typical of digital media, such as the use of dialogue-oriented features (Stromer-Galley, 2000; Stromer-Galley & Baker, 2006), the public performance of mediated authenticity (Enli, 2015), or the adaption of communication practices – such as ironic memes – prevalent in specific digital communication environments (Jungherr, 2012b; Kreiss, 2016b). A closer look at actual usage practices and the organizational structures shows that while campaigns and parties rhetorically might embrace specific usage practices indicative of openness and digital media, often this corresponds more with a public performance of digital culture than an actual adherence to it.

Finally, in its most primitive form digital media also serve as symbols for campaign dynamics by the surfacing of publicly available online metrics of campaign activity, such as a candidate's Twitter mentions or number of Facebook fans. These metrics are becoming objects of media coverage to illustrate a campaign's momentum (Jungherr, 2012a). This has become the digital equivalent of traditional 'horse-race' media coverage. At the same time, journalists and politicians now use digitally mediated public reactions to campaign media events such as televised debates in discussions of which a candidate or campaign 'won' (Anstead & O'Loughlin, 2015; Hamby, 2013). Through this coverage of the 'digital horse race', publicly available metrics on campaign activities are becoming *de facto* symbolic representations of a campaign's momentum.

To sum up, the use of digital media by campaigns and parties is not always directly related to core functions such as organization, resources, or voter mobilization and persuasion. Instead, the public use of digital media often has a performative function aimed at symbolizing the professionalism and innovativeness of parties, campaigns, or candidates.

4 DIGITAL CAMPAIGNING: WHERE TO GO FROM HERE?

Digital media have changed the practice of campaigning all over the world. However, the immediate impact of digital media on organizational structures of parties or campaigns seems

to be contingent on the respective electoral contexts and the relative position of those parties and campaigns in electoral competition. Changes brought to campaigning by digital media have neither transformed political power and competition, nor have things stayed the same as before (Jungherr et al., 2020, pp. 236–240). It is important to be clear here: while the practices of political actors and campaigners in pursuit of their goals have changed, these goals and the functions of campaigning to achieve them have not. The changes in practices have impacted political competition at the margins and sometimes have even resulted in surprising successes by unconventional actors or challengers of the political status quo (Jungherr et al., 2019). It is safe to say that the 2018 success of Italy's Movimento 5 Stelle and subsequent participation in a governing coalition between 2018 and 2021 would not have happened without the use of digital media by the party and their supporters to coordinate, internal decision making, and campaigning (Deseriis, 2020; Gerbaudo, 2019; Natale & Ballatore, 2014). Still, unlike some commentators had prophesized from the movement's digital-driven approach, their success has by no means led to a revolution of Italian politics as their subsequent fate at the polls during the elections for European Parliament in 2019 and the formation of a technocratic government under Mario Draghi after the collapse of their second governing coalition in 2021 have demonstrated. When trying to understand the consequences of digital campaigning we therefore need to be aware of the actual and very real changes digital media brought to politics as well as the persistent contexts, functions, and power structures these changes are contingent on and embedded in.

This limits an outcome-oriented perspective in the analysis of digital campaigning as political success depends not only on technology but also context and structures. Likewise, a 'repertoire' perspective in the analysis of digital campaigning expecting that all campaigns sooner or later will resemble contemporary US presidential campaigns also falls short. Such a perspective misrepresents the contingency of the role of digital media in campaigns based on their necessary embeddedness in specific electoral, cultural, organizational, and legal contexts. For example, as discussed above, the large investments by US parties, campaign organizations, or their extended networks in the development of specialized digital tools, infrastructures, and associated practices depended on the perceived contribution of digital tools to campaign funding through donation requisition. This important contribution to a primary campaign function allowed digital specialists to achieve important positions in political organizations. At the same time, the funds available for the development and acquisition of digital tools allowed political organizations to experiment with uses of these tools going beyond those narrowly associated with driving donations. Over time, the uses and personnel associated with digital media grew in importance and influence well beyond their initial contribution. In political contexts where digital media are not seen as crucial in providing funds for campaigns, digital specialists will struggle to successfully achieve central organizational positions. The same goes for advocates for the development of dedicated digital solutions and their pleas for funds with the party or campaign treasurer. This does not mean these people do not understand the use of digital media or their organizations somehow lag behind in the march of history toward the universal (speak US presidential) digital campaign. Instead, it means that the functions digital media serve are contingent on varying contexts and so are their actual uses by campaigns.

This chapter has also highlighted that the use of digital media by campaigns can be of merely symbolic value apart from contributing to core functions of a campaign. Consequently, academics should not take at face value campaigners' and consultants' reports regarding the importance of digital media in their campaigns. Instead, scholarship needs to question those

reports critically and ideally triangulate them with other approaches. What are the actual uses of digital media and what are their actual effects? Are they known? Are they quantifiable? If not, we should be critical of the often self-serving claims of the centrality of digital media in contemporary campaigning.

Overall, the study of digital campaigning has shown to profit much through interdisciplinary approaches and a broader understanding of parties and campaigns as organizations. Accordingly, there is much research potential in systematically linking the study of parties and campaigns to the sociology of organizations, transformation within organizations, competition of established and new organizations, learning and adaption within organizations over time, and comparisons between countries. Emerging promising research topics address the respective embeddedness of parties and campaign organizations in larger networks of organizations and actors or societal fields (Dommett et al., 2020a; Kreiss, 2019; Kreiss & Saffer, 2017). Another topic of great interest is processes of learning, innovation, and development within parties or campaign organizations (Epstein, 2018; Kreiss, 2016a).

Digital campaigning is a dynamic research object with many facets. As political practitioners and consultants learn and experiment with the new opportunities and challenges of digital technology, so must academic researchers adapt their theoretical frameworks and empirical approaches. This makes digital campaigning an exciting and stimulating field of research with great potential for interdisciplinary perspectives. At the same time, it is a field of great political importance as academics critically accompany the process of political and societal actors in realizing the potential of digital media in campaigning. Thus, academia can contribute to the broader understanding of the role of digital media in politics and support society in governing their use and dealing with their effects.

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