

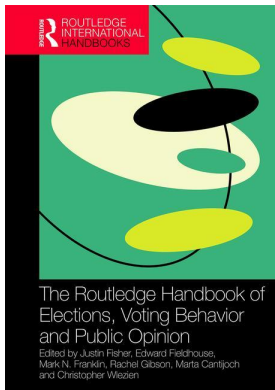
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DIGITAL CAMPAIGNING

Stephen Ward, Rachel Gibson and Marta Cantijoch

Introduction

It is now over 20 years since political parties began to move online and fight elections using new internet technologies, although in most established democracies it took another decade, or more, before internet access spread to the majority of voters. Much of the initial research tracked the adaptation of parties, and to a lesser extent voters, to the internet. In particular, research was dominated by supply-side web content analyses examining how parties were using the technology (what if anything was new?), and how they compared with one another (who gained, if anyone?). On the demand side of the equation, there was a much more restricted field of quantitative studies of voter attitudes and behaviors online. Much of the initial research spent time looking for uniform effect patterns – notably, whether the internet provided any boost to political engagement. The empirical results of the early years were often underwhelming, although it is arguable whether: expectations of “internet effects” were too high; researchers were asking the right questions; and they were looking in the right places. However, as the internet has matured, with a second wave of social media technologies (so-called Web 2.0), scholars have both revisited earlier questions and also increasingly expanded their range of methods and tools. Furthermore, the era of big data has provided a new stimulus to study and as the internet has become embedded into everyday life, research has arguably moved away from its focus on the technology toward more socially structured approaches.

The purpose of this chapter, therefore, is to provide an overview of the development of research in the online party campaign sphere focusing on three main aspects: how technologies fit into the evolution of campaigning over time and whether they have introduced new characteristics and a new style to election campaigns; how voters have responded to the growth of the internet and social media and whether it has changed the way voters engage with parties and campaigns; and, finally, what difference, if any, the internet has made to party competition and supposed decline of parties (have there been winners and losers in the internet era?).

The evolution of campaign style: data-driven and citizen-led campaigns

A series of articles in the late 1990s and early 2000s discussed the evolution of election campaigning over the course of the last century (Blumler and Kavanagh 1999; Norris 2001; Farrell

and Webb 2000). Commonly, they identified three campaign stages tied to changes in the social and political environment, party organizations and the media-communication nexus. Whilst none of these articles argued that technology was the only driver to party behavior, changes in media-communication environment are a clear thread in all of the models. In most advanced liberal democracies, it was argued that parties by the 1990s had moved (or were in the process of moving) toward a third age of campaigning – what Norris refers to as the post-modern era. This was stimulated most notably by the rise of new media technologies and the fragmentation of the media environment. Campaigns had become permanent, increasingly professionalized and marketized and with a renewed emphasis on localizing and personalizing national messages. Parties and candidates used stylized packaging and sharp marketing techniques, where their efforts were focused on discovering what the voter wants and shaping and targeting their policies (products) to meet these demands (Norris 2000; Bowers-Brown and Gunter 2002; Lees-Marshment 2005). This marked a significant shift from the previous modern campaign era that centered on parties bringing their message to the people particularly via the electronic media, especially television, with a focus on the national – often presidentialized – campaign. The new era also heralded a more mixed approach with a return to more localized campaigning.

Whilst some scholars were busy looking for evidence of this shift to the third era of post-modern campaigns, others had already begun to announce a fourth era of political communication built around internet communication. As Blumler explains: “Its crux must be the ever-expanding diffusion and utilization of Internet facilities – including their continual innovative evolution – throughout society, among all institutions with political goals and with politically relevant concerns and among many individual citizens” (Blumler 2013: n.p.). The apparently distinctive feature of the new era is the end to the pyramidal model of political communication where audience members, most of the time, were simply receivers of institutionally originated communications. Blumler also goes on to note that the internet has meant that previously interpersonal communication has become public; that it is now easier than ever before to communicate horizontally peer-to-peer, creating a potentially vibrant civic sphere. However, the vertical communication axis between citizens and politicians remains problematic, leaving a potentially lopsided democracy. Yet, how far this really represents a distinctively new stage is open to question. As Blumler himself notes, many of the features of the fourth age represent intensified third age characteristics, such as: the abundance of communication and information; centrifugal diversification leading to a mushrooming of civic associations; and non-party voices and medialization. Rather than a distinctive fourth stage, therefore, perhaps it would be better viewed as a halfway house – stage 3.5 perhaps?

Whilst new media technologies are, therefore, seen as central to models of the third/fourth campaign era, attention has focused more specifically on three supposedly critical features of twenty-first century campaigns: electronic targeting; interactive communication; and a decentralization of organizational control (Ward, Gibson and Lusoli 2008; Ward 2008; Lilleker and Vedel 2013):

- Targeting: computer technologies, databases and social media all enhanced the ability of parties/candidates to gather more data on the electorate, identify key swing voters (Bowers-Brown 2002) and target their campaign messages to particular groups or even personalize communication to individuals (narrowcasting).
- Decentralization: web tools were also seen as promoting a degree of decentralization by providing candidates, local parties and even individual supporters or activists with low-cost platforms for message dissemination (Norris 2000; Gibson and Ward 2003). The creation of these multiple communication channels theoretically made it more difficult for parties to

monitor and control information flows thus creating more opportunities for localization, personalization and message diversity, potentially fragmenting national party campaigns.

- Interactivity: perhaps what excited the most attention amongst democratic scholars was the interactive elements of new technologies (Hacker and van Dijk 2000; Shane 2004). In theory, the extent to which the public can become engaged with, and involved in, the campaign can be increased through internet technologies. Parties/candidates can now provide numerous opportunities via websites, blogs, email and social media to draw in the public and engage them in dialogue, changing the nature of campaigns from top-down events to more horizontal and conversational interactions (Ward, Gibson and Lusoli 2003).

Evidence to support such shifts in campaigning is, however, more mixed. It is arguable that, in terms of targeting, these were trends that had begun to be noted pre-internet (Denver and Hands 1997). Additionally, with regard to interactivity, repeated studies have consistently indicated parties'/candidates' reluctance to engage in interactivity or dialogue with voters (Stromer-Galley 2000; Gibson and Ward 2009; Jackson and Lilleker 2009). Content analysis of party websites almost uniformly found that parties largely used them for information provision rather than to stimulate interaction, and opportunities to participate online were often limited (Newell 2001; Strandberg 2006; Ward 2005). Often websites were simply seen as static electronic brochures (Gibson 2012). Similarly, interviews with party communication strategists revealed a marked reluctance to develop interactivity, especially in the context of election campaigns (Stromer-Galley 2000a; Ward 2005) for fear of opening oneself up to abuse and also losing control of the agenda to one's opponents. Even the arrival of social media platforms was greeted cautiously with relatively slow uptake by candidates/parties across many democracies (Southern and Ward 2011). Where candidates established a social media presence, critics often accused them of remaining in old-fashioned broadcast mode (Williamson 2010).

The question of whether internet technologies are to some extent decentralizing election campaigns is an intriguing one. Early research in the UK and the Netherlands stressed that computer technologies provide a further potential for centralization since party headquarters, leadership and campaign bureaucracies are often best placed to use the technology available (Nixon and Johansson 1999; Smith 1998, 2000). More directly, new groups of campaign professionals dedicated to web technologies (web designers, e-pollsters, e-campaign managers) were developing centered around party headquarters. Moreover, the growth of centralized database technologies targeting voters in key constituencies could further empower national party HQ to coordinate and direct campaigns (again trends identified in the pre-internet era). As time has progressed, however, it is clear that candidates and activists below the national level have increasingly adopted technologies – particularly social media platforms – and are in some instances using them to further personalize campaigning and establish media profiles (Southern and Ward 2011; Southern 2015). However, there is still debate as to how far this really individualizes or diversifies campaigns. Evidence from both the UK and Australia initially suggested a sort of top-down, centrally coordinated, localism (Gibson, Lusoli and Ward 2008), whereby candidates either replicated uniform web brochures or used social media to amplify (retweeted) centrally driven campaign messages. Again, such observations are not unique to the internet age. They reflect similar behavior by parties in respect of central oversight of candidates' leaflets (see, for example, Denver et al. 2002).

In sum, much of the supposed distinctiveness of digital campaigns is, more accurately, intensification and acceleration of some pre-existing trends (notably around targeting, personalization and organization). However, digital era campaigns do seem to have produced two distinct

strands of campaigning: on the one hand, a private, data-driven, top-down approach using online data-gathering and marketing aimed at identifying and mobilizing small groups of swing voters. Arguably, this is more of a continuation of the post-war model of centralized, professionalized, command and control electioneering. The second strand (characterized, in particular, by Obama's 2008 campaign) suggests a more novel approach of a more public citizen-initiated campaign model whereby parties/candidates make extensive use of new social media tools (blogs and social network sites) to outsource core campaign tasks (e.g., fundraising, canvassing) to ordinary supporters (Vacarri 2010; Norquay 2008; Bimber 2014). The web-based nature of citizen-initiated campaign actions means that, as well as bringing more citizen input and direction into the campaign management process itself, it also has the potential to bring more citizens as a whole into the electoral and political arena by increasing voter contact opportunities (Gibson 2012). Further empirical research is needed to understand the dynamics, contradictions and likely success of these two distinct approaches.

Internet “effects”: mobilizing and polarizing?

In the myriad of studies concerning internet effects, two debates have tended to dominate the field: first, could the internet change the nature and patterns of engagement between parties and voters, especially in an era of dealignment and protest where parties need to work hard to build and maintain support? Second, to what extent is the internet responsible for intensifying political polarization and hardening inter-party animus with potentially damaging effects for representative democracy?

The mobilization debate

There was considerable hope at the outset that the internet might offer at least a partial solution to declining turnouts and increasing dissatisfaction with politics and parties. Acres of newsprint and academic work have been devoted to the normative benefits of technology and how it might be harnessed to drive political engagement (see, for example, Barber 1998; Coleman 1999; Shane 2004; Dahlgren 2009). The case for technology providing mobilization boosts and enhancing participation rests on a combination of:

- Lowering the costs of engagement: whilst traditional participation in parties often involved a high degree of commitment it also limited who could connect. One suggestion was that participation could be widened, since the internet lowered the barriers to mobilization (Bonchek 1995; Bimber 1998; Gibson et al. 2003). Essentially, connecting with political parties could be done at a time of the citizen's choosing from the comfort of their own homes. Thus for those time-poor or housebound, for example, virtual tools could enhance their ability to engage more regularly.
- Increased informational stimuli: traditional political science already identified benefits of information stimuli to voter mobilization (Norris 2001; Bimber 1999). The suggestion was, therefore, that the internet would increase these stimuli by providing easy access to vast amounts of information and data.
- Enhanced ability to network: the importance of ties and solidarity have long been recognized in political science in terms of building supporter and activist bases (Castells 2001). Connections and peer networks have been important in developing shared beliefs and commitment to political organizations. Internet technologies provided an additional opportunity to develop such ties in a virtual context. Hence, online search engines make it easier

to identify like-minded individuals, share ideas and build solidarity that might deepen supporters' commitment to a candidate or party.

- Self-expression and creativity: the interactive nature of technology and users' relative control have led some to suggest that the internet is more stimulating and creative and provides a greater sense of enjoyment and expression than traditional methods of engagement, thus indirectly increasing users' efficacy (Chadwick 2009; Vaccari et al. 2015).
- Enhanced ability to target: whilst individuals can find others of similar political beliefs, the internet also enables parties to target such individuals more effectively and to keep them engaged even without a widespread activist base on the ground. Internet data gathering tools allow parties to identify potential sympathizers and to direct their marketing more efficiently to these people. Once links are formed, participation and engagement can be maintained and deepened through regular online contacts, invites and information to develop a thicker level of engagement (Lusoli and Ward 2004; Etzioni and Etzioni 1997).
- Generational boost: within all the above elements, it was also noted that there was an increased opportunity for a generational shift, since younger voters (often the least likely to participate in formal politics) were the ones most likely to engage extensively with internet technologies (Livingstone, Bober and Helsper 2005; Coleman 2005; Bennett 2008; Vromen 2007; Bakker and de Vreese 2011).

Skeptics, however, pointed out that the basis of any mobilization effects were mainly built on technologically determinist approaches but largely neglected political and social factors that shaped voters' predilection to participate or engage with parties (Davis 1999; Bimber and Davis 2003). Consequently, a number of scholars indicated that the most likely impact of internet technologies was the reinforcement of existing patterns of engagement since political interest was unlikely to be changed by technology alone. In essence, those most likely to engage politically online were voters with a pre-existing political interest. Essentially, therefore, internet technologies preached to the converted (Norris 2001).

In testing these ideas, much of the early survey work, especially during campaigns, did seem to support the reinforcement concept, although data were often limited and patchy outside the US. Surveys indicated that there was relatively low direct engagement with party online campaigns and, where it did occur, the profile of participants was similar to traditional patterns of engagement – that is, it was those with high levels of political interest, partisanship and civic skills, though there was evidence of a more youthful audience (Koc-Michalska and Vedel 2009; Rainie and Smith 2008). One explanation for this familiar pattern was the focus of participatory studies. Graham and co-authors have suggested that to get a fully rounded picture of engagement in the internet era there is a need to move beyond formal political sites or to go where people are, rather than where we would like them to be (Graham et al. 2016).

If evidence of broad direct effects was limited, several researchers did raise other intriguing possibilities, including gains in political knowledge, discussion and efficacy via online methods (Xenos and Moy 2007; Lupia and Philpot 2005; Vaccari et al. 2015). One interesting example directly related to election campaigning found evidence of potential two-step flows and indirect effects in relation to internet mobilization (Norris and Curtice 2008). The smaller group of political engaged and interested were further engaged by online tools but were then also more likely to converse with relatively inattentive citizens through traditional offline mechanisms, producing the possibility of indirect participation boosts.

Analyses of the deepening of engagement and stimulation of activism within parties have also often seemed relatively limited. The most popular forms of online activity did not differ that much from traditional participation, with information gathering and low-commitment activities,

such as donating and signing petitions, consistently amongst the most common. Though, as Gibson and Cantijoch (2013) have noted, it is possible that the internet is blurring high- and low-intensity participation. The argument here being that what were previously seen as passive acts of engagement, such as accessing news and information in the offline environment, have become more demanding and pro-active tasks in the online world. Keeping up with digital news typically involves seeking out sources and pulling them toward you rather than consuming prepared news programming that is pushed out through regular media channels.

Further research in both the US and the UK suggested that, whilst it might be possible to mobilize party/candidate supporters online, it is difficult to maintain engagement and party membership through online methods alone – that is, they required further face-to-face contact to boost engagement (Lusoli and Ward 2004), otherwise many dropped out. In the UK, this pattern of low-commitment activity and possible short-term engagement seems to have been maintained in the social media era. Poletti, Bale and Webb's recent work on the Labour Party's new membership base has found that recent joiners were "more likely to be clicktivists and slactivists rather than activists" (2016: np) – engaging online, but much less likely to be committed to traditional activist behaviors, such as attending meetings, canvassing and leafleting. In short, therefore, whilst one can find high-profile examples of online mobilization (notably Obama's 2008 campaign), the difficulty for parties is to maintain supporters beyond short campaigns and deepen their engagement within party structures.

The overall picture of online mobilization is perhaps best summed up by Boulianne's (2009) large-scale, meta-analysis of over 50 studies of online participation that demonstrated modest positive effects. Thus, whilst the internet may not have radically transformed who engages with parties, it has undoubtedly added to the way that we do politics and in turn this may eventually recalibrate our expectations of parties and politicians.

Polarization and intensification

The second major area of the effects literature is one concerning the intensification of political attitudes leading to balkanization. Donald Trump's US presidential victory along with the UK's EU referendum campaign in 2016 prompted renewed interest in the issue of growing polarization amongst voters. Media commentators have drawn attention to a coarsening of political debate, increasingly outlandish political claims and the rise of abuse and fake news. The finger was often pointed at social media and the so-called echo chambers that it creates for intensifying partisan negativity. Fears have been expressed that social media is driving voters into increasingly partisan and even extremist positions. Yet, none of these fears are necessarily new. In part, it replicates earlier longstanding concerns or debates surrounding the effects of the partisan bias of the print media in terms of agenda setting, priming, framing and cuing (Gunther 1998; Graber 1988). Additionally, even before the internet reached much beyond an elite audience, Nicholas Negroponte (1995) was already referring to the notion of "the Daily Me," where people would receive increasingly personalized news feeds. The notion of the Daily Me was subsequently expanded by Cass Sunstein (2001), who warned that the increasing choice and personalization of news raised the possibility of electoral balkanization where audiences largely consumed media which reinforced their existing prejudices but did little to foster deliberation in debate across ideological or social divides.

The notion that the internet exacerbates polarization amongst voters is based on a number of factors: first, that the internet and social media have significantly increased the amount of partisan sources of information available to the electorate. The lowering of costs of producing news and circulating means that potentially anyone with a mobile or tablet can create news sources

and stories. Moreover, information and news produced online was not necessarily subject to the same professional journalistic standards as mainstream media or, particularly, public service broadcasting. Hence, the internet could be seen primarily as fora for emotion and opinion-based statements. Second, increasingly, voters consume content on the basis of selective exposure – that is, they are drawn to material that backs up pre-existing beliefs or coincides with their pre-existing interests. The increasing levels of media choice mean that people can more easily access news and current affairs but also screen out information deemed as uninteresting, irrelevant or disagreeable (Prior 2007). Third, this selective exposure is then supported by, and intertwined with, people's online networks and filters. In part, this reflects automated filter bubbles. For example, platforms such as Facebook automatically promote posts that fit with our declared interests and views. Additionally, the argument behind polarization suggests that our networks are largely homogenous, with like-minded people communicating with one another – the birds of a feather flock together argument (McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Cook 2001). The importance of these networks is strengthened by research that indicates that we are much more likely to pay attention to messages from friends, family and close colleagues (Sunstein 2006). Hence, Twitter, in particular, is often seen as an echo chamber where people of similar political outlooks spread or replicate each other's messages but are rarely challenged by alternative viewpoints or voices. The apparent long-term impact of increased exposure to like-minded views is the adoption of more extreme positions (Mutz and Martin 2001). Fourth, some psychological studies have indicated that not only are the networks similar but we are more susceptible and pay more attention to material and information we like or that we agree with and conversely are more likely to discount or delete material which does not fit with our belief patterns (Colleoni, Rozza and Arvidsson 2014). This filtering is then heightened by the anonymity of some elements of technology. This reduces social and psychological inhibitions and cues, thus stimulating individuals to express more extreme views and/or indulge in abuse of opponents in ways that they would not in the offline world (Joinson 2007).

Whilst intuitively these arguments make logical sense, the research evidence on voter polarization and social media consumption is far from clear-cut. At the outset, it is worth remembering that polarization trends in the US were identified well before the internet came along. Authors such as Prior (2013) argue that it was the development of cable news especially that was more significant in changing patterns of partisan news consumption. Furthermore, various researchers have reminded us of the continued importance of mainstream media in elections. Whilst internet sources may have grown dramatically in importance over the past decade, television and familiar mainstream media (MSM) sources that have moved online remain important players in terms of news consumption (Nielson and Schroder 2014; Meijer and Kormelink 2015). Indeed, in countries with a strong public service broadcast tradition, trust in these relatively non-partisan sources remains high (Brevini 2013). Even in the US, it is argued that the bulk of voters remain wedded to mainly middle-of-the-road media sources (Prior 2013).

Yet, Lelkes, Sood and Iyengar (2015), in their broad study of impact of access to broadband media, have contended that there is a link to increasing polarization in the US. This is because access to internet broadband has led to both increased supply and demand for partisan programming and, more specifically, increasing exposure to imbalanced partisan rhetoric and sources for audiences. They argue that even small changes in media choice can impact significantly on preferences and attitudes. Furthermore, when changes in media consumption develop over longer periods of time then effects can be cumulative.

Whilst there is plenty of support for the notion of homophily in online networks, there is still disagreement about both its extent and its impact. Early research on the US blogosphere indicated intense degrees of clustering between either liberal or republican bloggers (Adamic

and Glance 2005; Hargittai, Gallo and Kane 2008). In terms of social media networks (especially Twitter and Facebook), a range of reports have found high levels of ideological and social clustering (Halberstam and Knight 2016; Huber and Malhotra 2016; Lee et al. 2014). Nevertheless, there are still some analyses that have pointed to a more diverse nature in social media networks (Gentzkow and Shapiro 2011). In particular, it has been suggested that people may have wider networks online than they do in real life. Although many of the links are relatively weak, they are still important in providing diversity to people's sources of information. Consequently, there is evidence that citizens are more likely to be accidentally exposed to information on social media than in Web 1.0 or even via MSM since both these require a greater degree of selection (Gil de Zúñiga and Valenzuela 2011). Indeed, Barberá's (2015) comparative study of Germany, Spain and the US actually refutes the popular wisdom and goes as far as to suggest that social media is reducing polarization.

One common line of thought on polarization is that its greatest impact is on the more politically committed. The majority of the electorate pays far less attention or, indeed, screens it out. Thus, Prior (2013) finds evidence of polarization mainly amongst the relatively small core activist groups. However, such activist partisan groups are likely to have more impact on overall conduct and debate in campaigns since they are the most engaged. So it could be that these groups drive the agenda toward more extreme positions, whilst the majority electorate become increasingly disillusioned and detached.

At the time of writing, there is renewed concern over internet driven polarization following acrimonious campaigns in the US presidential race, referendum campaigns in the UK and Italy (Brookings Institute 2016; Duggan and Smith 2016; McCutcheon 2016) and the rise of the populist right in Europe more generally (Habermas 2016; Engesser et al. 2016). Two themes in particular have emerged; first, much popular attention has centered on the rise and impact of the spread of fake news via social media (Guardian 2016), especially in the US presidential race. A US BuzzFeed news analysis (2016) reported that the large partisan Facebook news sites were regularly producing false news stories about opponents. This is not simply a US problem; recent elections in Europe have likewise seen false claims spread virally and rapidly. For example, the 2016 Austrian presidential election saw websites spread rumors that the Independent-Green backed candidate was suffering from dementia. Similarly, in the 2016 French primary, rumors were spread of false links between one leading center-right candidate (Alain Juppé) and the Muslim brotherhood (Guardian 2016). Second, related to this rise in fake news is the apparent growth of automated political propaganda generated by bots (Forelle et al. 2015). Research calculated that, as US election day approached, bot messaging was increasing significantly. In addition, the vast majority of bots (85 percent) were producing partisan messages and pro-Trump bots were considerably more prevalent than Clinton ones (Kollanyi, Howard and Woolley 2016).

In summarizing the debate around political polarization and the internet, there is widespread agreement that the internet may have exacerbated rather than started the problem. However, it is also not clear how far polarization has spread amongst electorates, especially outside the US. More nuanced readings of data suggest that polarization is more likely to occur amongst the already politically partisan. What is clear though is that debates about social media and polarization are likely to increase in the wake of the rise of populism across liberal democracies.

Party competition: who benefits?

One early line of thought was that political parties generally would be losers in the internet era (Rheingold 1993; Negroponte 1995; Morris 2000). In particular, much interest was generated

in ideas of direct forms of democracy with electronic technology stimulating the growth of electronic voting and referendums, and the ability of individual citizens to participate in politics bypassing collective organizations (Rash 1997; Morris 2000). Alternatively, some argued that, whilst all organizations might gain from new technologies, the real winners were likely to be the more flexible, less hierarchical, protest networks (Bimber 1998; Castells 2019; Bennett and Segerberg 2013). It is no coincidence that much of this enthusiasm for direct plebiscitary democracy emerged in the US where the internet achieved significant penetration rates earlier than elsewhere but perhaps more importantly political culture individualized and was less party-centered than European democracies. However, in many established democracies, politicians and mainstream parties were concerned that the internet might further erode their support base (see Blears 2008).

Twenty years on and clearly parties have not disappeared. Indeed, the internet has been seen as crucial to the rise of some candidates and parties. For instance, the success of the Five Star Movement in Italy has been attributed, in part, to its online organization (Mosca, Vaccari and Valeriani 2013), whilst in the UK the rise of Jeremy Corbyn to the leadership of the Labour Party has also been partially attributed to the harnessing of social media to significantly increase the party membership base (Bale 2016). Thus parties per se are not necessarily threatened by internet technologies but nevertheless mainstream political parties have undoubtedly been challenged by demands for more direct methods of participation and the often disruptive nature of social media (Margetts et al. 2015). It is, therefore, worth considering two decades after the emergence of the internet whether there have been any distinct patterns in terms of party adaptation to the net and whether there have been any real winners or losers?

Equalization and normalization: leveling the communication playing field?

The dominant question of many studies of party campaigns online has been the notion of equalization of party competition online and whether minor and outsider parties were likely to be the main beneficiaries of the technology. The idea of equalization or the leveling of the communication playing field rests on a combination of elements (Corrado and Firestone 1996; Rash 1997; Gibson and Ward 1998; Gibson, Römmele and Ward 2003; Lilleker and Vedel 2013): first, that internet technologies have weakened the power of so-called mainstream media, especially the power of newspapers as gatekeepers and controllers of the political agenda. In the old world of television, radio and newspapers, there was limited space for political coverage and editors/journalists primarily determined who had access to that space and what would be of interest to their publics. The virtual sphere is largely without editorial control and therefore has been viewed as a more open space. Hence, political parties that were squeezed out of MSM could establish a platform and presence much more easily online. Interrelated to this notion of a more open space, is the idea that the internet lowers cost of campaigning. Whilst older media forms required a considerable outlay of resources and expertise, the suggestion was that, with minimal levels of skills and technology, outsider and minor parties/candidates could establish a campaign platform to sit alongside their mainstream rivals. In short, therefore, the internet allowed them greater access to get their message across to voters. In allowing these minor parties presence and access, it also potentially provided an additional benefit – that of amplification. By establishing themselves online, relatively minor parties could appear larger and more credible online than they were in reality (Ackland and Gibson 2013).

The benefit of the internet was not simply to minor party organizations themselves, but also to their supporters and activists. The interactive nature of the internet allowed supporters to find one another and to build networks of support even across large geographical areas. Whereas

distance had hampered the building of activism in the pre-internet world, the virtual sphere collapsed many of these barriers (Gillan 2009).

The idea of equalization has also been supported from time to time by the emergence of high-profile campaigns by outsider candidates. One of the first to attract attention was the Independent Jesse Ventura's 1998 success in the Minnesota Gubernatorial race. This, in part, was attributed to his ability to build email networks almost from scratch and encourage online donations (Stromer-Galley 2000b); although it is worth remembering that Ventura already had a high media profile as a former wrestler and radio talk show host. Similarly, Howard Dean's ultimately failed bid for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2004 garnered considerable media attention for its innovative use of blogs, meet-ups and online mobilization. The Dean campaign was seen as a template of how a little known outsider with limited resources could build a national campaign from scratch using the internet (Trippi 2004). Obama's triumph in the Democratic primary in 2007/8 overcoming the initial favorite, Hillary Clinton, was also seen as evidence of how innovative web campaigning could help organize campaigns and build virtual momentum (Pollard, Chesebro and Studinski 2009; Vaccari 2010). Nor were such outsider examples necessarily limited to the US. The success of South Korean challenger candidate Roh Moo-Hyun in the 2002 presidential race was seen as the result of his ability to mobilize younger Koreans via internet tools (Hague and Uhm 2003). In recent years, the Italian Five Star Movement (5SM) has been seen as another exemplar of outsider success built on online platforms. The movement party was popularized initially via its founder's blog site and latterly by social media organization (Tronconi 2015; Hartleb 2013). Yet, whilst organizationally 5SM benefited from new technologies, its political successes stemmed more from the collapse in confidence in the Italian political establishment (Fella and Ruzza 2013).

These high-profile examples largely remain the exceptions though. The idea of equalization or leveling has been regularly challenged by the concept of normalization, arguing that internet campaigns should not be seen as divorced from the traditional world of politics. Indeed, normalizers such as Margolis and Resnick (2000) claimed that mainstream parties would come to dominate cyberspace as they did traditional campaign space, particularly as the internet became more and more commercialized. Running sophisticated online campaigns, it was argued, still required significant resources and skills, notably as the web design become more professionalized. Moreover, as Bimber and Davis (2003) noted, the traditional media still remained important as voters still primarily relied on television for news and current affairs and the MSM also tend to shape the agenda of online discussion rather than vice-versa. Additionally, Hindman, Tsioutsoulouklis and Johnson (2003) pointed out that, given many voters used search engines to find information, the playing field could be significantly influenced by search engine rankings, which were often significantly skewed toward already influential players. Thus, overall, the expectation of normalizers was that online party competition would increasingly come to resemble the offline world.

Examining the empirical studies conducted over the past two decades in a range of democracies provides a fairly consistent story in relation to party online competition. The so-called Web 1.0 era almost uniformly suggested a generalized pattern of normalization (see Table 26.1). Only a few early studies prior to 2007 suggested equalization. For example, Gibson and Ward's (1998: 22) report on the 1997 UK general election concluded that: "far from leaving the minor parties in the dust the internet appears to be doing more to equalize exposure of parties' ideas to the electorate compared to other media."

The vast majority of the analyses, though, concluded that the larger parties ran the richest websites in terms of their functionality (depth of information provided, opportunities to engage and resource gathering) but also used their pre-existing resource advantages to drive traffic to

their sites. Yet, underlying the broad picture of normalization was an acceptance that some minor parties could at least establish a website presence more effectively on the internet. Moreover, in isolation, the virtual sphere was at least more level than MSM. With this in mind, Ward (2005, 2008) argued that rather than leveling the communication playing field, the internet had widened it allowing more parties or candidates to survive politically but not necessarily thrive electorally. Political system factors, such as electoral thresholds or non-proportional electoral systems, often still mitigated against translating such online presence into electoral success.

Nonetheless, moves toward normalization did not necessarily represent a steady evolution. There is evidence from some studies of an ebb and flow pattern in competition – notably, that major parties were more likely to dominate in election campaigns whilst minor counterparts were more successful outside election periods (Gibson and Ward 2009; Lilleker and Vedel 2013). The rise of social media has subsequently seen a renewed interest in re-examining the dominance of normalization (Gueoguieva 2008; Kalnes 2009; Strandberg 2009). Social media, it was suggested, provided an even lower cost platform than increasingly costly and professionalized websites and a greater ability to organize and motivate supporters for minor parties. Empirically, there are some indications here that, whilst normalization still predominates, there is greater degree of hope for some of the smaller parties. Early Web 2.0 studies in Finland (Strandberg 2009) and Norway (Kalnes 2009) both found that minor parties had, at least, an established presence. However, Gibson and McAllister (2015), in their longitudinal study of Australia, went even further. They found that, compared to their major counterparts, Green Party candidates were not only more likely to adopt new media but also received an electoral boost (in vote terms) for doing so.

Beyond normalization?

Studies have also indicated though that, whilst generalized normalization seems to predominate, the concept of normalization needs refining beyond simply the size of a party. For example, two minor party families have repeatedly been highlighted in empirical work as outperforming their counterparts – the Greens and the far right. Incentives for using internet technologies are seen as one persistent explanation for this pattern. In the case of Green parties, beyond the cost/resources incentives outlined above, their core audience is seen as heavy internet users (for example, students or public-sector, university-educated workers), providing additional stimuli for technology use. Moreover, some studies indicate an ideological element, with the internet facilitating organizational models of operation favored by Green parties – that is, decentralized, less hierarchical and network based (Voerman and Ward 2000). There may also be an ideological component to far right activity online, with many groups viewing the traditional media as part of a corrupt liberal establishment that seeks to lock them out of political discussion (Copsey 2003). However, there may be more practical reasons why far right groups have consistently used online technologies to mobilize – secrecy and anonymity. Whilst far right sympathizers may be reluctant to admit their preference in real-world situations, online they can find support for their views and are potentially emboldened to then act (Whine 2000; Copsey 2003; Lilleker and Jackson 2011).

Whilst much of the focus of party competition online has been on adaptation and use of the internet, the second part of the equalization equation – whether this makes any electoral difference – is much less prominent in research. The assumption, often based on interviews with party campaign strategists, is that the internet has made limited difference to electoral performance. As early as 1997, D'Alessio found a positive and significant effect of having a website on US congressional candidates' vote. A positive relationship was also detected between candidates' online campaign presence and electoral support by Gibson and McAllister (2006, 2015) in

Table 26.1 Party competition studies

<i>Author</i>	<i>Publication date</i>	<i>Country</i>	<i>Competition</i>	<i>Notes</i>
Voerman	1998	Netherlands	Normalization	
Margolis et al.	1996 and 1999	US	Normalization	
Gibson and Ward	1998	UK	No clear trend	Possible ebb and flow between elections and peace time
Gibson and Ward	2000a	UK	No clear trend	
Gibson and Ward	2000b	UK (EU elections)	Equalization	
Gibson, Newell and Ward	2000	Italy	Normalization	
Newell	2001	Italy	Normalization	
Gibson and Ward	2002	Australia	Normalization	Minimal distinction between parties
Cunha et al.	2003	Italy, Spain, Portugal, Greece	Normalization	
Tkach-Kawasaki	2003	Japan	Normalization	
March	2004	Russia	Normalization	
Lusoli	2005	EU elections	Normalization	
Conway and Dörner	2004	New Zealand	Normalization	
Hara and Jo	2007	South Korea and US	Didn't fit either	
Schweitzer	2005 and 2008	Germany	Normalization	
Small	2008	Canada	Normalization	
Latimer	2008	US	Normalization	Sub presidential study
Jackson and Lilleker	2009	UK (EU elections)	Weak normalization, possible ebb and flow	

Ward	2011	British Columbia	Normalization	Over-time study
Vergeer and Hermans	2013	Netherlands	No clear pattern	
Klinger	2013	Switzerland	Normalization	Social media study
Xu	2011	Singapore	Equalization on presence but not on outcome	Social media study
Sudulich	2013	Ireland, UK, Italy, Spain	Normalization	
Gomez and Muhamed	2010	Singapore, Malaysia	No clear fit, lean towards normalization	Over-time study
Hinz	2014	Germany	Equalization (party)	Social media study
Lorenzo-Rodriguez	2014	Spain and Italy	Normalization (candidate)	
Hansen and Pedersen	2014	Denmark	Variable but social media looks more promising for equalization	Over-time study
Koc-Michalska et al.	2016	Poland, Germany, UK, France	No fit	Web 2.0 study
Ridout et al.	2015	US (Senate)	Normalization	YouTube study
Samuel-Azran, Yarchi and Wolfstfeld	2015	Israel	Equalization	Social media study
Southern	2015	UK	Normalization (adoption) but social media shows signs of equalization	
Koc-Michalska et al.	2016	UK, Poland, France, Germany	Normalization	Over-time study
Gibson and McAllister	2015	Australia	Variable – normalization Web 1.0 era, more balanced social media era	Over-time study
Guðmundsson	2016	Iceland	Normalization	Social media study
Tan, Tng and Yeo	2016	Singapore	Normalization	

Australia between 2001 and 2010. Similar results were reported by Sudulich and Wall (2010) in Irish parliamentary elections. In seeking to account for the positive findings Gibson and McAllister (2011: 240) speculated that it might be seen as “a proxy for a degree of candidate professionalism and competence not captured by the standard Australian Candidate Study measures” but required further investigation. Other studies, however, have not observed much in the way of positive electoral effects (Fisher, Cutts and Fieldhouse 2011; Fisher et al. 2016; Hansen and Pederson 2014).

Although work on normalization/equalization has now covered a large range of democracies research has tended to consist of electoral snapshots of individual campaigns and there is far less comparative or longitudinal work. As a result, authors such as Anstead and Chadwick (2008) have argued that the importance of the systemic political and media environment in explaining party and voter activity online is underplayed. Hence, in comparing the US and the UK they pointed to five key variables (degree of systemic institutional pluralism; organization of membership; candidate recruitment and selection; campaign finance; and the “old” campaign communication environment) as offering a framework to shaping difference in internet campaigning cross-nationally. Rigorously testing out the influence of such systemic factors still remains to be conducted.

Conclusions

Looking back on 20 years of digital campaigning, the early hopes of radical internet-driven transformation provided a framework that was not altogether helpful in terms of developing our understanding of the relationship between the internet and politics. Indeed, the empirically generated backlash of limited effects studies has then arguably understated the extent of change as the internet has become embedded into political life. Democratic theorists and commentators spent much time initially focusing on the creation of virtual public spheres and notions of electronic democracy. However, the focus of parties and campaigns has often been driven by more prosaic concerns, particularly how to maximize their message in an increasingly noisy and competitive communication environment. In academic terms, it took some time before internet research was grounded in, and related to, existing knowledge/theory of campaigns, media and communication effects, party organization and political participation. However, there is growing realization that our older definitions and models of what constitute politics or political participation are being blurred and expanded by internet technologies.

The three broad areas we have assessed here exhibited similar patterns of initial hype, followed by a search for grand uniform effects, before settling into examination of more nuanced social theory-led approaches. Hence, whilst the internet may not have equalized competition, there is evidence that it does challenge elites and has created new uncertainties for politicians. The world of social media politics seems to have exacerbated earlier trends toward personalized, populist and oppositional style politics, although it remains to be seen whether it can maintain long-term constructive activism or support effective party governance. Similarly, the internet may not have radically reshaped who participates (in campaigns), but it has changed the nature of campaigns and how we participate. It has been a hugely beneficial tool for the political activist and politically interested, which can help stimulate overall mobilization. However, there is increasing evidence that, in some circumstances, social media may well be furthering polarizing attitudes and creating participation divides. The risk is that increasingly hostile and heated campaigns are fought out amongst the politically committed but are largely divorced from, and disillusion, the bulk of the less politically engaged.

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