Deep Democracy, Thin Citizenship: The Impact of Digital Media in Political Campaign Strategy

By
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Digital media strategies are a crucial component of contemporary political campaigns. Established political elites use database and Internet technologies to raise money, organize volunteers, gather intelligence on voters, and do opposition research. However, they use data-mining techniques that outrage privacy advocates and surreptitious technologies that few Internet users understand. Grassroots political actors and average voters build their own digital campaigns, researching public policy options, candidate histories, lobbyist maneuvering, and the finances of big campaigns. I examine the role of digital technologies in the production of contemporary political culture with ethnographic and survey evidence from four election seasons between 1996 and 2002. Democracy is deeper in terms of the diffusion of rich data about political actors, policy options, and the diversity of actors and opinion in the public sphere. Citizenship is thinner in terms of the ease in which people can become politically expressive without being substantively engaged.

Keywords: political communication; information technology; campaign strategy; Internet; data mining

When one considers the role of digital technologies in contemporary political life, it is easy to be caught up in the rhetoric about the potential of technology for keeping the public sphere healthy. What makes a healthy public sphere, and, rhetoric aside, how has the public sphere fared in the first decade of the digital age? Theorists such as Gabriel Tarde, Jurgen

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Habermas, and Benedict Anderson have enunciated useful ways of assessing the health of the public sphere. Perhaps the best way to assess the health of the public sphere in the digital age is through analysis of how political campaigns go about producing political content and how citizens in turn consume this content.

The public sphere is a space where people exchange ideas and challenge one another's opinions. First, it requires shared text, regularly published and generally accessible. Obviously, "text" in this sense does not refer simply to the printed word but includes the multiple forms of content we now consume—offline and online—that contain information about political campaigns and public policy options. Citizens must be confident that everyone has access to the same quality of information. Second, it requires the act of conversation, through which we constitute the public sphere when we discuss the affairs of state and share the floor without discrimination. For practical reasons, we agree to mediators such as pollsters and newspaper editors, who assist the act of conversation by distilling opinion and presenting distinct, coherent policy options.

Third, it requires a place for action: legislatures, courts, voting booths, and places of administration where decisions are made and enacted (Tarde 1898; Anderson 1991; Habermas 1991; Katz 1992). The more of these spheres the better, says Calhoun (1998), so that different people can communicate their needs to one another. Increasingly, digital technologies are used to organize political information in the public sphere, and unlike those used in traditional media, these interactive tools allow for both the production and consumption of political content. The way digital technologies are used for decades to come will be patterned by today's design choices, and understanding the normative structures and assumptions of the architects of political information systems will help us develop some theories about what democracy and citizenship mean today.

To understand the implications of digital technologies such as the Web sites, listservs, and electronic polls for the health of the public sphere, it is important to study both the production and consumption of political culture. To help understand how political culture is produced by contemporary campaign managers, I analyze data from ethnographic observations of political consultants specializing in new media campaign strategies and a social network analysis of how this professional network developed between 1995 and 2004. To help understand how contemporary citizens consume political culture, I compare data from a series of nationally representative election surveys conducted during four campaign seasons: 1996, 1998, 2000, and 2002.

Information Technology inside the Campaigns

The process of producing political culture has changed significantly over the past decade. Certainly political victories have often been won or lost by the quality and quantity of information that campaigns have access to—polling information about constituents, details about political competitors generated by opposition research, and status reports from different parts of campaign organization. Until

recently, only larger, well-financed, national campaigns could afford the computing infrastructure and consulting services to make relational databases work toward political ends. Today, both campaigns and citizens can buy relational databases online, databases that match voters' names and addresses with voter registration records, credit card purchases, and more.

The campaign consultant's instinct is to fully manage the interaction between a candidate and a constituent, sheltering the candidate from tough questions, prompting and coaching as possible, and ending the interaction as soon as the candidate drifts off message or falters (Stromer-Galley 2000). As Larry Purpuro, the Republican National Committee (RNC) deputy chief of staff and webmaster in the 2000 campaign, explained, "Anybody involved in a campaign, regardless of their ideology, is always concerned about control. Chat is difficult to control" (quoted in Jagoda 2000, 48). Thus, while one may imagine scenarios in which digital technologies may help meet deliberative goals, campaign managers have very specific uses and gratifications for the online tools they build. One of the managers at a conservative political action committee (PAC) revealed that he has the same goals as the activists from well-known groups like MoveOn.org and MeetUp.com. "I have the same goal as the activists," he says. "I'd like to get a million people. I want the Speaker of the House to be able to send an email to a million people about how the latest tax package benefits them. I want to be able to circumvent Peter Jennings." He is particularly angry about how the liberal media spins his campaigns, though he does not think of himself as a kind of information gatekeeper. "Constituents always complain about feeling disconnected from Congress because the media doesn't transmit a GOP politician's message clearly." In a sense, he is a classic Republican, expressing dismay at the idea that digital technologies can be used to invigorate the public sphere by reducing the transaction costs of participating in public life:

> These people are assuming that the obstacle to participation is the labor; I think the obstacle is personal interest. Why is it better to have more people participating if their level of interest is so low that they can't even get off their butts to get a stamp and write Washington? Are their opinions really valuable if they can't afford 33 cents for that opinion? If they will blubber in front of the local TV cameras but not be bothered to actually vote? Or worse, like in Florida, they try to vote but don't take care to learn how the ballot works?

Even though he expresses cynicism at the idea that digital technologies can or should be used to engage the public, he and his colleagues working on campaigns that are more liberal increasingly integrate the technologies into campaign strategies.

Campaign consultants have developed a number of models for predicting political outcomes, and the new digital technologies help improve the accuracy of these models. Whether activating citizens or channeling the rancor at policy makers, they make increasingly reliable calculations about public elections or legislative votes on issues important to their members. A high-profile consultant with Democratic Party causes joked, "We do grasstops, not grassroots," when he described his new campaigning science:

> We've organized 60,000 telegrams in the last three months through our website. But that's because I know if I pay Western Union to deliver the telegrams, and if I buy this many banner ads with this kind of message, I can take this many impressions and convert them into this many telegrams, from these specific states, districts or zip codes. Say we have nine senators who are inclined to vote our way but not willing to commit just yet. We dig up the data on the zip codes in their districts. It should cost me $350,000 to buy 3,000,000 banner ads a month in those districts. On average, 1 percent of viewers click through a banner ad to learn more about the campaign, and on average nine percent of those buy a message and get outraged enough to write a telegram. That gives me 270 telegrams from angry constituents to deluge four key congressional offices in the week before my vote. That's usually enough to tip a leaner [Senator]. We know how much it costs to recruit an activist.

Figure 1 summarizes the political principles behind this consultant's political strategic calculations. Digital technologies make possible a very refined science of campaigning, a science that permits ever more predictable electoral or legislative outcomes. Of course, the specific ratios between campaign funding, advertising reach, and response rates varies by issue area. For example, even though about one in ten people who view a solicitation to join a campaign will join the campaign (regardless of the issue area), and one in ten of those members will be passionate enough to write letters on behalf of the campaign, these response rates are slightly higher for issues that appeal to retired adults. What makes this modeling possible is a relatively new informational product: digital political information. Political campaigns have always invested in good data, but data records of surprising detail can be quickly collected and distributed over digital technologies, and this data has become the means of creating and sorting political messages.

Digitized political information as a product For the most part, political consultants with expertise in digital information either work for clients who want to survey the public about commercial products and services, target the public with political messages, or approach the public through particular political campaigns. They usually offer three kinds of services to their clients.

When lobby groups form, political consultants with expertise in digital technology build legitimacy for the cause by identifying members unaware of the need for representation. For example, a lobby group will often claim to represent both the firms in an industry and the consumers of that industry's goods. Increasingly, they make these claims sound legitimate by presenting data about the importance of their industry to the economy or consumers. Second, these firms do direct-inference public policy polling for clients. In other words, they run survey instruments that field clear questions about political topics. For example, a direct-inference question might ask, "Do you support the president?" or "Should the government offer universal health care?" and pollsters can use basic demographic features to explain variation in responses. Third, these firms increasingly do indirect-inference public policy polling. In other words, they collect data from survey questions, demographic data, credit card purchases, Internet activity, or voter registration files and make inferences about opinion. They might infer, without actually fielding survey questions, that a woman who is older than fifty-five, living in New York,

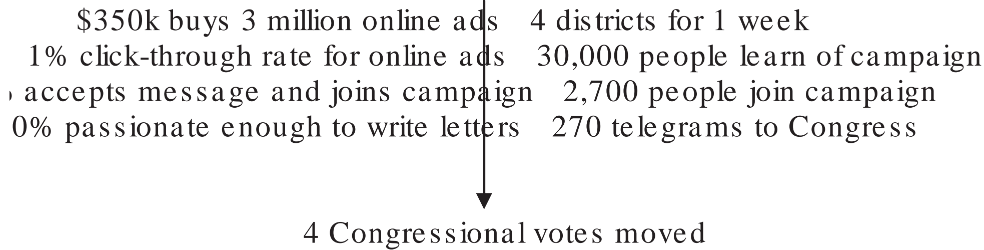

FIGURE 1
CALCULATING A POLITICAL CAMPAIGN

registered as a Democrat, and spending a significant amount of her income on pharmaceuticals is very likely to think the government should offer universal health care. Moreover, purchases of guns, birth control, or other consumer goods can help researchers make indirect inference about a consumer's political attitudes.

With new media tools, political campaigns can amass data from so many sources that complex relational databases can be used to extrapolate political information without ever directly contacting a respondent. In important ways, the data is "cleaner" than that taken from traditional survey methods because the contact, cooperation, and completion rates are higher. Depending on how campaigns use new media for research, they are more likely to contact exactly the people they want to sample, more of these contacts are likely to participate, and more of the survey is likely to be completed by respondents. The raw data may be cheaply purchased by anyone through the Web sites that campaigns maintain, though more advanced analysis and premium data are available at greater costs. In sum, today's commercially available political information is multisourced; nuanced; and scaled from named individuals and households to residential blocks, zip codes, and electoral districts.

Digitized political information in the marketplace. The contemporary market for political information now includes a diverse population of actors, including advertising and public relations agencies, media and entertainment companies, university research institutes, pollsters, nonprofits and private foundations, political parties, Internet service providers, and PACs. Most of these organizations make deliberate efforts to associate with academic research institutions to appear more legitimate. They cohost conferences, work with academic data sets, and use university names liberally throughout their business plans and corporate identity literature.

They buy, sell, and trade political information, which in its raw form can be sold cheaply to any citizen with Internet access. In other forms, aggregated and relational, political information is more expensive and priced at a point that only the more high-end lobby groups can afford. The cost of polling has dropped substan-

tially, such that political information is not just available to presidents and political parties; it is now available to anybody who can afford it. Thus, competition between organizations in this market has driven down the price of political information, made the product more widely distributed, and made the range of products more diverse. The market for political information is more open—in a sense, democratized—than ever before, in that more people buy and sell political information. Elite political lobbyists, grassroots movements, established political parties, and “after-work” activists have access to the same informational market. Most campaigns, however, use informational products to meet one particular goal: rather than broadcasting their political messages, they seek to narrowcast their political message. Narrowcasting is the practice of sending particular political messages to particular people and ensuring that supporters or constituents receive the campaign messages. Has the new depth and breadth of digital information had an impact on our political sophistication? How is the public responding to the changing opportunity costs of citizenship in a digital democracy?

Consuming Political Information Online

One of the critiques of digital politics has been that citizens would choose to view political content they already know and not expose themselves to challenging ideas (Sunstein 2001). But has the consumption of political news changed this way since digital technologies became a part of our media system? It turns out this is a difficult question to answer, because few sources of nationally representative data are comparable over time. Data from the Pew Center for People and the Press and the Pew Internet and American Life Project help reveal the role of digital technologies in the consumption of political culture.

Part of the analytical challenge of studying digital communication technologies in the political sphere is that these technologies are not simply a means of mass communication, easily comparable with television, radio, newspapers, or other ways of delivering news content. By definition, these technologies are interactive, allowing us to both produce and consume political content and engage with the public sphere in a way not possible with broadcast technologies. Supporters of McCain, Bradley, Dean, and other challenger candidates have effectively used tools like the Internet to organize, volunteer, and donate money. As former Governor of Minnesota Jesse Ventura’s campaign manager famously quipped, “Ventura didn’t win because of the Internet, but he would not have won without it.” Beyond the success stories of particular online campaigns, how widely do citizens use tools like the Internet for political communication?

Between 1996 and 2002, the proportion of the adult American population who reported that the Internet was “very important” to helping them decide how to vote increased from about 14 to 20 percent. A small but growing group reported that something they learned online made them decide to vote for or against a particular candidate, and in 2002, almost a quarter of the population reported having visited a Web site to research specific public policy issues. The number of people

TABLE 1
CONSUMING POLITICAL CULTURE IN THE DIGITAL AGE—MEDIA USE DURING FOUR ELECTIONS, 1996-2002 (IN PERCENTAGES)

	Election Year			
Media Use	1996	1998	2000	2002
Comparative media use				
Newspaper—read a daily newspaper yesterday	50[a]	47[a]	40	39
Radio News—news about election campaigns mostly provided by radio[b]	44	41	17	13
Television News—watched a news program on television yesterday	59[a]	65	64	61
Internet Use, Ever—ever been online to access the Internet or World Wide Web or to send and receive e-mail	23[a]	41	54	61
Internet Use, Yesterday—went online to access the Internet or World Wide Web or to send and receive e-mail yesterday	—	—	30	35
Online News, Ever—ever been online to get news	—	—	12	41
Online News, Yesterday—went online to get news yesterday	—	—	12	17
Active Political Research Online, Ever—ever been online for news or information about politics or the campaign	4	6	16	24
Active Political Research Online, Yesterday—went online for news or information about politics or the campaign yesterday	7	9	9	8
Combined media use				
Number of different sources of political content used on a daily basis[c]				
No media	—	17	14	11
One medium	—	33	29	27
Two media	—	35	36	36
Three media	—	15	20	24
Four media	—	0	1	2
Total	—	100	100	100
Voting-age population who voted[d]	49	36	51	40
Total weighted N	4,360	3,184	13,343	2,745

SOURCE: The author’s calculations with data from the Pew Center for the People and the Press and the Pew Internet and American Life Project.
a. This question was fielded in April of that year.
b. For 1996 and 1998, radio use is based on the number of people who reported listening to news on the radio in the previous day. For 2000 and 2002, this was extracted from a multiple response question, “How did you get most of your news about the election campaigns in your state and district? From television, from newspapers, from radio or from magazines or from the Internet?”

(continued)

TABLE 1 (continued

Two responses were solicited, and a "radio" variable was created if either response was for radio. A very small fraction of respondents chose "magazine," so this category is not used in this analysis.
c. This question was fielded in July 1996.
d. Source: http://www.fec.gov/elections.html.
e. Of the people who go online to access the Internet or World Wide Web or to send and receive e-mail, the number of who have the following specific media for political news: they watched the news or a news program on the previous day; they read a newspaper on the previous day; they identified radio as one of the two most important sources for information and news about the election campaigns in their state and district or reported listening to the news on the radio the previous day; they researched news online, whether a general news topic, a political news topic, or news specific to a political campaign.

who visit Web sites that share their point of view is smaller (8 percent) than the number of people who visit Web sites that have different views (13 percent). In other words, more people report visiting Web sites that challenge their opinion than report visiting Web sites with perspectives they share. About a quarter of the adult population goes to Web sites on specific issues that interest them. Sixteen percent of the population has participated in political culture by engaging with political Web sites through several kinds of interaction, such as joining campaigns, volunteering time, donating money, or participating in polls. Similarly interesting, 16 percent of the population has reported "learning something new" from the political Web sites they visit (Howard forthcoming).

More people online, doing more political activities. Table 1 reveals patterns in the rise of the Internet as a communication tool over the past four election cycles. Until recently, it made sense to present such data as percentages of the subsample of Internet users alone. Currently, however, the Internet is an integral part of campaign communications, and a significant proportion of the population uses it to learn about politics. Since the Internet is increasingly embedded in the daily lives of many U.S. citizens, it makes sense to review these data as percentages of a total sample.

In 1996, the Internet was a new political communication tool, but by 2002, two-thirds of the adult population had access to the Internet. Over this time, a growing portion of the population has chosen to learn about and contribute to political life through digital technologies.

Since 1996, the portion of the public reporting to have read a daily newspaper dropped from 50 percent to 39 percent. The proportion of people listening to news radio and watching the news or a news program on television also declined. Between 2000 and 2002, the proportion of people going online on a daily basis increased from 30 to 35 percent. This question was not asked in prior surveys, but in each of the four survey periods, the interviewers inquired if respondents had

"ever" gone online, and this proportion rose from 23 percent in 1996 to 61 percent in 2002.

Currently, about one-third of the adult population reports having gone online sometime the previous day. Specifically, in comparison to other news media, about 41 percent of the population reports having consumed news online and 17 percent of the population reports getting news sometime the previous day. The proportion of people who deliberately go online for political or campaign news during elections grew from 4 percent in the 1996 elections to 24 percent in the 2002 elections. The portion of adults who look for news or information about politics on a daily basis during campaign periods seems to be consistently less than 10 percent of the total adult population, though the proportion doing so on a weekly basis has increased modestly over the past four elections. These questions were fielded when candidate and issue campaigns would have been prominent in the news, between October and December during election years. In each survey period, however, respondents were asked if they had ever gone online to look for news or information about a specific election period, and the population who responded positively to this query doubled from 6 percent in 1996 to 13 percent in 2002.

> [Political consultant firms] collect data from survey questions, demographic data, credit card purchases, Internet activity, or voter registration files and make inferences about opinion.

According to the survey data, the four most commonly used media for information about politics are television news and news programs, radio, newspapers, and the Internet. Increasingly these media reference each other, and many publish political news and campaign information in multiple formats. Still, they are for the most part distinct technologies used for consuming political culture. The Internet, additionally, allows users to help produce political culture through blogs, personal campaign sites, and other forms of content creation. Over the past four election cycles, almost two-thirds of the adult population in the United States had some online experience with political news, information, or other content.

Over this period, several interesting changes in the way we produce and consume political news took place. First, the proportion of people who never look for political information has diminished. Second, a sizable proportion of the population consistently consults at least two media types for political news. Third, the proportion of people who consult three or four other kinds of media for political news

TABLE 2
THE PUBLIC SPHERE IN THE DIGITAL AGE: MORE TEXT, SHARED LESS (IN PERCENTAGES)

Type of Political Web Sites Visited	Election Year				Change
	1996	1998	2000	2002	
Local Political Web Sites—devoted to news or information about local community	34	31	24	7	–27
Political Office Web Sites—leaders holding political office, such as House of Representatives, the Senate, or the White House Web sites	35	15	10	—[a]	–25
Nonpartisan Web Sites—such as those run by groups with no declared political affiliation, for example, the League of Women Voters	46	43	32	24	–22
Political Candidate Web Sites—set up by a candidate for political office or on behalf of a candidate for office	21	11	17	5	–16
Partisan Web Sites—such as those run by the national political parties, for example, the Democrats or Republicans	24	11	18	22	–2
Special Interest Group Web Sites—providing information about specific issues or policies of interest, such as the environment, gun control, abortion, or health care reform	42	49	—[b]	65	+23
U.S. adults online who visited at least three of above types	31	21	16	14	–16
U.S. adults online weighted N	993	3,465	11,824	2,783	

SOURCE: The author's calculations with data from the Pew Center for the People and the Press and the Pew Internet and American Life Project.
a. In 2002, no question about office-holding politicians was fielded.
b. In 2000, a different phrasing was used: respondents were asked if they visited "Special Interest or Issue Specific Web Sites," and 11 percent responded yes. The phrasing, "special interest," probably discouraged responses, while providing examples such as "environment" and "health care reform" prompted responses in other years, so the number for this year is not comparable and not reported in this table.

has increased steadily, from 15 percent in 1998 to 21 percent in 2000 to 26 percent in 2002. The two clear implications from Table 1 are that the size of the group that never searched for political news decreased while the size of the group that liked consulting multiple media for news increased.

Table 2 reveals much about what kind of political content is being viewed online. Outside of news providers, six types of Web sites provide content about politics and public policy options: special interest groups, political office holders, candidates for office, partisan groups, nonpartisan groups, and community activist groups.

Figure 1 and Table 1 reveal that overall, the number of people using digital tools for political ends is increasing. Table 2 suggests, however, that the range of political actors in the public sphere whom we turn to for political information is changing. Over time, the proportion of people who visit the Web sites of elected leaders, political candidates, political parties, nonpartisan groups, and local community groups has declined significantly. Over this time, the Web sites of special interest groups have captured most of the attention of citizens looking for political content. In the 2002 campaign season, fully 65 percent of the public had turned to special interest groups to research politics and policy, while parties, leaders, candidates, and nonpartisan groups were consulted less frequently. In 1996, just less than a third of Internet users visiting political Web sites actually visited at least three different types of political Web sites. More recently, the proportion doing this has been halved.

Even though television is still the single most dominant medium for election news, those who have used the Internet for political information report different kinds of reasons for preferring it as a medium. They find the information more convenient, feel that other media do not provide enough news, get information not available elsewhere, and find that online news sources reflect their personal interests. They augment their understanding of current events, research records of political candidates, or deepen their understanding of particular issues by visiting the Web sites of national and local news organizations; commercial online services; and government, candidate, or issue-oriented Web sites. Users must invest in good computers and solid Internet connections, but the transaction costs of doing political research are significantly less in the digital age.

Deep Democracy, Thin Citizenship, and Social Control

One of the ironies of the digital age is that even though media sources seem to be consolidating, their success depends on their ability to deliver customized content to differentiated, issue-specific social groups. A few of these social groups are sophisticated and self-defining—social control is exercised by political campaigns that use information technologies to parse the public sphere into issue-specific constituencies as needed.

When social scientists began to treat mass media structures and content seriously, they exposed a range of social functions behind large technical systems for collecting and distributing text in the public sphere. For example, Lazarsfeld and Merton (1948) described several sources of bias and problematic outcomes, arguing that the social function of mass media was status conferral, the enforcement of social norms, and the narcotizing dysfunction. Digital communication technologies, however, are fundamentally different from mass media structures. Whereas mass media systems for broadcasting content had distinct roles for the elite producers of content and the mass consumers of content, digital communication tech-

nologies are networked, and digital media systems for narrowcasting content blur the distinction between producers and consumers of content. Despite the difference between mass and networked media systems, some scholars expected that the Internet would become a mass communication technology as more people used it. Such “massifycation” would not be a quality of the technology but of the cultural content available online. The digital age, however, does not appear to be marked by mass communication technologies in form or mass culture in content. Thus, it may surprise some observers that the proportion of people producing and consuming political content online has increased, not decreased, with the diffusion of digital technologies. Others will be surprised that the number of people who visit political Web sites for which they already feel an affinity is smaller than the number of people who visit Web sites with content that challenges their convictions. The public sphere actors we seem to turn to most appear to be specialized and issue-specific.

The new market for digital political informationMost of the scholarship assessing the political role of new media has concentrated on individual users as solitary voters who collect and evaluate political information or who decide that collecting and evaluating political information is a low priority (Howard and Milstein 2003). The common analytical frame for this work situates these users within an abstract public sphere. In contrast, one of the most important roles for new media in politics has been in opening up the market for political information. Political information often includes details about personal identity and opinion that allow researchers to make relational and explanatory inferences. This information about individuals is collected from a variety of sources, including credit card purchases, Internet activities, and academic surveys. It might be used to infer, for example, political preferences based on gender, race, or consumer activity.

Several companies now amass and market detailed profiles of citizens using traditional survey and data-mining methods, but both have also developed powerful new media tools to complement traditional methods. Their spider programs crawl through the Web, automatically collecting Web site content, such as personal contact information or an organization’s press releases. They often deploy unsolicited e-mails to gather or spread information for commercial or political marketing campaigns.

Spyware, a kind of software that is covertly installed on users’ computers during Internet use, reports a user’s Web activities back to the sponsoring organization. Spyware can be covertly installed on a user’s computer, but even if it is consensually installed, the user rarely understands how the software works and often forgets that it is recording activities. Many companies have developed variations of these tools, but political consultants now apply them to gathering information about political preferences. Consultants combine the latest statistical methods with Web-based sampling techniques to generate reliable information about how political characters and policy options play in the public sphere.

Whereas traditional survey methods took several weeks to generate results, Web-based surveys collected more nuanced polling data in less time (Witte and Howard 2002). Most digital campaigns claim to only share aggregated, not person

ally identifiable, information with other campaigns, but a surprising amount of data leaks as political consultants take their talents—and data—from campaign to campaign. In the 2000 campaign season, several politicians simply altered their Web sites' privacy policies when campaign managers realized that they had collected politically and commercially valuable data from their supporters.

But these consultants have a problematic role in this new marketplace for political information: they mislead people into surrendering personal information by promising participants that expressing an opinion to business leaders and politicians will greatly influence corporations and government, guiding the ways products and services are developed. Digital campaigns commonly tell prospective participants they will be joining a revolution in research that will irrevocably alter approaches to the collection and application of information and that participation is part of a citizen's duty to help good governance. After several months, many panelists forget that spyware is installed on their machines.

Political data-mining companies take advantage of legal protections for their product. An example of a move in this direction can be found in the dozens of words that pollsters, political consultants and political data miners have already trademarked, including *belief, communication, connectedness, deliberative, empathy, fairness, inclusiveness*, and *learner*. Thus, digital campaigns take advantage of the rhetoric about new media technologies to excite citizens into sharing data. Moreover, it conflates the incentive to participate as a consumer with the incentive to participate as a citizen. Finally, the political information that used to circulate in the public sphere now circulates in a marketplace where it is priced, trademarked, and sold.

The vast majority of U.S. legislators, presidential candidates, and both Democratic and Republican parties (at both the state and national level) have used political data-mining firms to modernize their campaigns. Lobbyists also combine databases and software to target potential constituents and supporters; generate campaign awareness; solicit contributions through the Internet, telephone, mail, and door-to-door efforts; and improve press relations and public relations. They use databases and software to reach audiences based on demographic, geographic, or political criteria. Digital campaigns also accept, process, authenticate, analyze, and disclose contributions received through the Internet.

Many political databases came from companies that provided free e-mail service and required subscribers to fill out questionnaires. Initial questionnaires collect the demographics of database members, such as age, gender, income, expected major purchases, hobbies, interests, family size, and education. This information is supplemented using spyware to track database members' patterns of computer use. The largest political databases, in fact, now include the information of more than 150 million registered voters in the United States, as culled from state and local boards of elections, departments of motor vehicles, municipal licensing agencies, and social science survey data. Relational databases commonly include dates of birth, dates of voter or motor vehicle registration, residential addresses, family details, political jurisdictions, and party affiliations. Through digital technologies, data some of us consider private information—from e-mail

addresses and telephone numbers to credit card purchases, political preferences, and income status—has been added to these databases. Moreover, specialist lobby organizations buy, sell, and trade data regularly, and several political consulting houses have detailed, expanding information on more than three-quarters of the American voting public, as well as on hundreds of thousands of unregistered voters.

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Most of these firms have compiled their digital resources without the explicit or informed consent of the people in the databases, and even though some of the data is from public records, a significant amount of it is not. In other words, most of the data is not being used in ways that we would imagine serve a public interest. On the contrary, combining various sources of information paints a highly detailed picture of our private and public lives.

The combined relational databases are used to serve the private interests of political candidates or lobbyist campaigns—to uniquely customize messages to manipulate certain responses from particular individuals in the database. Even if some members initially gave consent for the use of their political information, most would not have consented to its continuous aggregation and applications in unexpected ways. Both political organizations and commercial industry are able to drive traffic to their Web sites by directing customized banner and e-mail advertisements via the political, demographic, and commercial characteristic profiles of members of the database. In addition, partner or affinity campaigns share data on prospective sympathizers, members of the public, or elected officials.

Voter registration records are governed by complex regulations. More than twenty-five states, including California, prohibit the commercial use of voter registration records. Yet campaigns run by PACs are registered as nonprofit charities and are exempt from many of these restrictions. This allows for the distribution of political information through Web sites that deliver raw data processed as mailing labels, telephone sheets, walk-lists, polling samples, or any files suitable for import into many current software programs.

In the digital age, political information has become a highly marketable, easily collected, quickly distributed, cultural product. That this political information is bought and sold is not new. However, the quality of the product and the structure of the market evolved significantly once political campaigns started using new media technologies to collect and distribute information.

Direct democracy through the market? The market for political information has changed (or grown, expanded, etc.) significantly and now includes a more diverse group of actors buying and selling a wider and deeper range of informational politics. While I have been speaking in the abstract about consumers, citizens, and users, it is important to note that they are real people. All too often, literature that searches for the positive, negative, or neutral political implications of new media tools also speak of abstracted, isolated technology users, missing interesting changes in the qualities of political information and the structure of the market in political information.

While political lobbyists have profiled the majority of readers of this article, four of every ten readers are profiled in exhaustive detail in terms of identity and political opinion. These detailed profiles are used to draw direct and indirect inferences in the commercial and political sphere. Political actors then use this information to design the messages we receive. In the end, this means a growing amount of the political and consumer content we see has been tailor-made for us alone and that others are getting messages uniquely tailored for them.

Smaller data-mining firms and consulting houses have also begun to collaborate internationally, starting in the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia, seeing a potential opportunity for using international databases to implement U.S.-style political campaigns in established and emerging democracies. Thus, the details of the identities and opinions of citizens of other countries are also being gathered and traded to create a global market for political information.

Such detailed knowledge about individuals is used to exercise panoptical and discursive power (Foucault 1977, 1999; Poster 1990, 1995), but political information is also a key component of the long-observed surveillance duty of governance (Giddens 1987; Webster 1995; Scott 1998). Contemporary political theorists may agree that the state is defined as a social organization with legitimate control of both the machinery of violence and the machinery of surveillance, but I find that, increasingly, other entities have purview over political information. The raw political data are available to both powerful lobbyists and individual citizens, so even though some organizations have more resources to bear on analyzing political data, individuals can increasingly use the same data to observe organizational behavior in the political context.

With new media, both political and commercial organizations conduct surveillance of citizen opinion on public policy questions. Even though individuals' identities and opinions are bought and sold in the open electronic marketplace, the technologies that allow indirect inference about opinions make it less necessary for political organizations to attend to freely voiced views. Customizing political and commercial messages is an old marketing trick, but the degree of tailoring possible

with new media is so much more powerful that political information today is a significantly different product.

Customizing political messages to the degree possible with new media reduces the quality and quantity of shared text in the public sphere, restricting our future supplies of political information based on assumptions about the opinions and identities of our past. Increasingly, an important part of our political participation occurs somewhat beyond our control, co-opted into a highly privatized and often covert sphere, one that trades, channels, and filters our political information, thus denying a forum for its direct, free, and deliberate exchange.

> Even if some members initially gave consent for the use of their political information, most would not have consented to its continuous aggregation and applications in unexpected ways.

Where is the shared text? The competition between political campaigns is one of the central acts of democratic discourse. This competition results, however, in smaller pieces of text being shared by smaller and smaller groups of people. Experienced Internet users, for instance, self-segment by programming their news services to provide particular content; nonusers generate other kinds of electronic information that reveals political preferences to tech-savvy lobbyists. The information technologies that are available to the public are those that prevent random encounters with political content. They are designed to entrench a citizen's political norms through software that privileges some content over other content. Some citizens make the original expression of preferences by visiting political Web sites and self-identifying as fiscally conservative, environmentally progressive, or socially liberal, for example. They develop their news accounts with political parties or PACs such as the National Rifle Association, Christian Coalition, or Sierra Club.

The campaign managers of these organizations take great interest in preparing content for their membership by reducing their members' exposure to content from groups with competing political agendas, decreasing the amount of random exposure to content that might provide evidentiary challenges to the group's norms, and editorializing a context to even the most innocuous news events. Internet search engines privilege some content over other content, political

webmasters have developed tricks to direct the results of casual searches for political information, and there are a wide range of hurdles to seeking information from government agencies (Introna and Nissenbum 2000; Hargittai 2003).

If a shared text is important to the public sphere, journalists have a key role in editing content on behalf of the public. Obviously, no text can be universally shared among the citizenry, and practically speaking, media systems distribute political content to most people, most of the time; a degree of randomness ensures that everybody is exposed to some new ideas some of the time. Digital technologies remove the random distribution of content, something that occurs when people casually pick up news stories from the newspapers they read and television they watch. Internet users either choose to consume political content or they do not. Campaigns either choose to produce content for you or they do not. More people are sharing less. Moreover, in the digital age, technologies like the Internet are having a significant impact on the quality and quantity of shared text in the public sphere. For those who know how to find it, there is more rich detail on public policy options and a range of interesting new tools for expressing and measuring diverse political opinions.

In the abstract, a healthy public sphere needs shared text and acts of conversation. Survey research suggests that Americans increasingly use digital tools to research politics and engage their friends, family, and political leaders in discussion. Ethnographic observation suggests, however, that political campaign strategies are increasingly geared toward fragmenting the public sphere, either by sending particular messages to particular people or by designing tools for citizens to encode their personal interests and sequester their consumption of news. Although the excitement of the digital age was based in technological potential, we can be less confident that everyone in our polity has access to the same quality of regularly published, generally accessible, political information.

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