

Spiders, Spam, and Spyware: New Media and the Market for Political Information¹

[in Mia Consalvo, Ed., Internet Studies 1.0 (Peter Lang: 2003)]

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3/31/2003

Abstract

Technological innovations can radically alter the organization of power in politics. However, there is significant debate over whether new media technologies – such as the Internet, wireless networks, and relational databases – will have positive, negative, or any media effects at all. We argue that one of the most important implications of new media is in the market structure for political information. Whereas information about public policy opinion used to be expensive to collect, highly reductive, and restricted to a limited number of powerful political actors, today it is much less expensive, highly nuanced, and widely available. More importantly, whereas pollsters used to ask direct questions about political opinion, they now have the ability to extrapolate political information from our commercial and noncommercial activities. We investigate the work of two organizations, a public policy polling firm named Grapevine Polling, and an advocacy consulting firm named United Campaigns. We find important changes in the structure of the market in which individuals' and groups' political information is manufactured and sold, and important changes in the qualities of the product itself.

I. Introduction

Grossman's *Electronic Republic* (1996) argues we are moving into a third stage of democratic evolution. The early direct democracies evolved into representative democracies, and the new electronic media will bring us to a wired reincarnation of direct democracy. "Telecommunications can give every citizen the opportunity to place questions of their own on the public agenda and participate in discussions with experts, policy-makers and fellow citizens" (Grossman 1996) p. 48). He recognized, however, that it would take a deliberate effort to get technology to work in this way. Whether or not we accept the pundit's enthusiasm for wired democracy, even the headiest theories of deliberative democracy argue that communications infrastructure can either be the great hope or great bane of discourse.

To observe how politics can work in tandem with technology, we must first look at how politics worked without it. Many scholars of political campaigning make distinctions between the pre-modern campaign, the modern campaign, and the postmodern campaign. Between the mid-19th century and 1950, local party volunteers took the pulse of member opinion with party meetings and local canvassing efforts. Very little centralized control

¹ For their assistance with this manuscript, the authors would like to thank Aimee Strasko, Paul Ford and Nika Pelc.

of campaign logistics existed. The news media comprised a partisan press, radio, and local posters or pamphleteers, which brought relatively low budget, local public meetings, and whistle-stop leadership tours to the attention of a stable, partisan electorate. Modern campaigns, run between the 1960s and late 1980s, were long, nationally coordinated campaigns run by professional consultants and specialist advisors from a central party headquarters. Occasional opinion polls helped the campaign keep on top of public sentiments, and the nightly television news broadcasts were the most important medium for publicizing closely managed campaign events. The costs of these campaigns grew immensely to fund televised media events and political commercials, which had to target increasingly fickle cross-sections of the electorate. The postmodern campaigns that developed in the 1990s remained nationally coordinated but became operationally decentralized. Presidential campaigns, in particular, transformed to have their currently permanent quality, applying impression-management strategies from the beginning of primary contests, through the election cycle, through the term of office, to legacy campaigns or preparation for the subsequent electoral contest. Ever more professional consultants use regular opinion polls and focus groups to produce ever more costly targeted campaign television ads and events, trying to manage news production for segments of the electorate that are no longer in stable party alignments (Norris 2000). The dominant feature of the new campaign, however, is no longer costly television ads, but instead detailed relational databases and targeted communications multimedia (Witte and Howard 2002). Today's campaign is more reflexive, less costly, and operates in a political sphere with fewer (media-based) barriers to entry. Many researchers frame their investigations into new media and politics as studies of positive, negative, or neutral new media effects.

Positive Political Effects. The argument that Internet technologies are good for democracy is grounded in the claim that the technologies can mitigate some of the more debilitating features of contemporary political communication. Some argue anything that will overcome the effects of unidirectional media or inadequate information supplies will help democratic deliberation. For example, virtual communities extend the public sphere (Schwartz 1996), especially when they grow around bulletin boards for exchanging ideas, mobilizing the public, and building social capital (Rheingold 1993; Rheingold 2002). African American families in particular can equalize their relationships with corporate American and political elites with an accessible communications media rich in information (Redd 1988). Studies of local activism have revealed that Internet tools facilitate social networking across traditional socioeconomic boundaries, engage people with group learning experiences, and draw new participants into public life (Brants, Huizenga et al. 1996; Wittig and Schmitz 1996; Tsagarousianou, Tambini et al. 1998; Mele 1999). People who use new media avoid the harmful effects of traditional media, especially television, by experiencing politics in a more direct and interactive forum, reducing the distance between the governed and government (Budge 1996; Grossman 1996). From the point of view of large political parties and incumbent candidates, one benefit of having uninformed voters is those voters tend to use media cues and informational short cuts in place of becoming fully informed (Lupia 1994; Bartels 1996).

While citizens have traditionally had an inadequate supply of information from traditional news sources, limited opportunities to interact with public policy officials, and few opportunities to deliberate with each other -- each of these problems can be overcome with the Internet. Internet technologies permit users to create new social contexts for themselves based outside neighborhood, friends, and family, through which they might convert to minority or independent political positions (Burbank 1997),

Negative Political Effects. Some have argued the Internet is at best a global shopping mall and at worst a den of inequity. The political content online is a base kind of political pornography in which information is grossly simplified, polarized, and not easily verified. The technology used to show gun lovers news about how guns are used to save lives, also shows gun haters stories about accidental shootings. Those who deplore the role of the Internet in contemporary politics argue that specific tools – especially email – can incapacitate political offices². Mud slinging will occur over any media, but many new media have the additional benefit of obscuring authorship or making the content creator anonymous (Tumber and Bromley 1998). For example, during the 2000 election campaign, Republicans were responsible for the websites [gorewillsayanything.com](#), [gorereinventionconvention.com](#), and [gorepollution.com](#), while Democrats produced [iknowwhatyoudidintexas.com](#) and [millionairesforbush.com](#). In other words, Internet technologies exacerbate and reinforce current political trends. No amount of innovative Internet technology can overcome the existing knowledge gap that prevents lower-educated and information-poor groups from learning quickly during a campaign period, instead leaving them more susceptible to manipulation by political advertisements (Tichenor, Donohue et al. 1970; Moore 1987). Those communities that do form online are at best ‘pseudo-communities’ that are intensely interpersonal or mass communication systems that are more intimate but allow for more effective social control (Beniger 1987). Since only the most politically extreme voters make use of information resources and the most informed citizens actually vote (Palfrey and Poole 1987), we can expect that when the Internet provides widespread access to informational resources, political life will become a clash of the most opinionated, not a dialogue of the self-taught and inquisitive. On an individual level, some researchers argue the Internet reduces social involvement and psychological well being, which certainly could not be good for the future of the deliberative democracy (Kraut, Patterson et al. 1998). Some have concluded that new media can only intensify the worst features of industrial capitalism, in part because the culture of information exchange on the Internet is driven by the commercial ethic of selling information (Gutstein 1999; Barney 2000).

No Political Effects. Others have argued that there are few or negligible distinct new media effects and all that is good and bad about political life in America is simply replicated online (Margolis 1997; Margolis 2000). No legislative initiative exists to build a fifth wing of government specifically designed within the checks and balances system to institutionalize Internet tools in political life with regular, sanctioned public opinion

² In 2000, Capitol Hill received more than 6.5 million messages a month, about 8,000 per representative and 55,000 per senator, a volume that had doubled over the previous two years Goldschmidt, K. (2001). *Email Overload in Congress: Managing a Communications Crisis*. Washington, DC, Congress Online Project..

measurement by government organizations. There will be no direct democracy Internet voting in the near future. The Internet has no particular impact. Process may be faster, or more efficient, but does not itself make voters more sophisticated or more likely to participate. This has been called the C-SPAN effect: despite the broadcast of substantive legislative deliberations from coast to coast, few people watch the deliberations and no measures of political sophistication show improvements since the channel went live (Bennett 1988).

Most 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. The common analytical frame for this work situates these users within an abstract public sphere. In contrast, we argue one of the most important roles for new media in politics has been in opening up *the market for political information*. Thus, we prefer an analytical frame that situates users in a marketplace in which information about their identity and opinions is traded. We define political information as 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, and it might be used to infer, for example, a person's political preferences from her gender, race, or consumer activity.

II. Spiders, Spam and Spyware

Two particular U.S.-based organizations, Grapevine Polling and United Campaigns, are good examples of the kinds of contemporary organizations that work within the marketplace for political information.³ Both amass and market detailed profiles of citizens using traditional survey and data mining methods, but both have also developed three kinds of powerful new media tools to complement traditional methods. Their spider programs crawl through the Web, automatically collecting website content, such as a person's email or physical address, or an organization's press releases.⁴ They often employ spam, or unsolicited email, to gather or spread information for commercial or political marketing campaigns.⁵ Spyware, a kind of software which Grapevine and

³ United Campaigns and Grapevine Polling are pseudonyms based aggregates of our ethnographic and archival study of 18 businesses, academic research institutes, and political action committees between 1999 and 2003.

⁴ A good technical definition of a spider program is provided by Webopedia: "A program that automatically fetches Web pages. Spiders are used to feed pages to search engines. It's called a spider because it crawls over the Web. Another term for these programs is webcrawler. Because most Web pages contain links to other pages, a spider can start almost anywhere. As soon as it sees a link to another page, it goes off and fetches it. Large search engines, like Alta Vista, have many spiders working in parallel." Webopedia (2003). Spider, Webopedia. **2003**.

⁵ A good technical definition of spam is provided Webopedia: "Electronic junk mail or junk newsgroup postings. Some people define spam even more generally as any unsolicited e-mail. However, if a long-lost brother finds your e-mail address and sends you a message, this could hardly be called spam, even though it's unsolicited. Real spam is generally e-mail advertising for some product sent to a mailing list or newsgroup. In addition to wasting people's time with unwanted e-mail, spam also eats up a lot of network bandwidth. Consequently, there are many organizations, as well as individuals, who have taken it upon themselves to fight spam with a variety of techniques. But because the Internet is public, there is really little that can be done to prevent spam, just as it is impossible to prevent junk mail. However, some online services have instituted policies to prevent spammers from spamming their subscribers. There is some

United often covertly install on users' computers during Internet use, reports a user's Web activities back to the sponsoring organization. In addition to covert installations, spyware is sometimes installed with the generally uninformed agreement of the user, who often later forgets about its presence.⁶ Many companies have developed variations of these tools, but Grapevine and United apply these tools to gathering political information.

A. Grapevine Polling

Grapevine Polling, a U.S.-based, worldwide market research and consulting firm, has a long history of polling beginning in the 1970s, when it was founded by three professors of social science who specialized in survey methods. In the late 1990s, Grapevine, which is privately owned, switched from doing consumer and political research via face-to-face and telephone to selling itself as pioneering the Internet method to conduct scientifically accurate market research. Grapevine claims to combine the communicative power of the Internet with probability sampling to produce the first statistically valid population-projectable survey tool capable of generating reliable information for decision-making. Commercial market research is the bulk of Grapevine's business, so it carefully limits its public policy polling work and only takes contracts from particular clients so as not to run the risk that its findings in a public policy poll will upset the industries that provide 90% of its business. It will not take work from the major political parties, political candidates, or high-profile advocacy groups. Grapevine's annual revenue tops \$150

debate about the source of the term, but the generally accepted version is that it comes from the Monty Python song, "Spam spam spam spam, spam spam spam spam, lovely spam, wonderful spam..." Like the song, spam is an endless repetition of worthless text. Another school of thought maintains that it comes from the computer group lab at the University of Southern California who gave it the name because it has many of the same characteristics as the lunchmeat Spam: Nobody wants it or ever asks for it. No one ever eats it; it is the first item to be pushed to the side when eating the entree. Sometimes it is actually tasty, like 1% of junk mail that is really useful to some people." Webopedia (2003). Spam, Webopedia. **2003**.

⁶ A good technical definition of Spyware is provided by Webopedia: "Also called adware, spyware is any software that covertly gathers user information through the user's Internet connection without his or her knowledge, usually for advertising purposes. Spyware applications are typically bundled as a hidden component of freeware or shareware programs that can be downloaded from the Internet. Once installed, the spyware monitors user activity on the Internet and transmits that information in the background to someone else. Spyware can also gather information about e-mail addresses and even passwords and credit card numbers. Spyware is similar to a Trojan horse in that users unwittingly install the product when they install something else. A common way to become a victim of spyware is to download certain peer-to-peer file swapping products that are available today. Aside from the questions of ethics and privacy, spyware steals from the user by using the computer's memory resources and also by eating bandwidth as it sends information back to the spyware's home base via the user's Internet connection. Because spyware is using memory and system resources, the applications running in the background can lead to system crashes or general system instability. Because spyware exists as independent executable programs, they have the ability to monitor keystrokes, scan files on the hard drive, snoop other applications, such as chat programs or word processors, install other spyware programs, read cookies, change the default home page on the Web browser, consistently relaying this information back to the spyware author who will either use it for advertising/marketing purposes or sell the information to another party. Licensing agreements that accompany software downloads sometimes warn the user that a spyware program will be installed along with the requested software, but the licensing agreements may not always be read completely because the notice of a spyware installation is often couched in obtuse, hard-to-read legal disclaimers." Webopedia (2003). Spyware, Webopedia. **2003**.

million, and the company employs about 900 full-time employees. The company continues to acquire smaller market research firms, including firms outside the U.S., forming a global web of for-profit personal information exchange for marketing purposes. By switching from traditional methods of market research to the Internet, Grapevine asserts it is harnessing the Web's interactive power to gather market intelligence that organizations need, continuously gathering political information about more individuals nationally and internationally.

Grapevine's clients include Corporate 1000 companies, advertising and public relations agencies, media and entertainment media, universities, opinion pollsters, industry lobby groups, non-profits, and private foundations. Grapevine promises to deliver consumer insight, predictive intelligence, and brand loyalty. Client applications include: brand management diagnostics, testing advertising and promotions, evaluating new products and concepts, polling public opinion, as well as tracking real-time response to major news, political, or entertainment events. With its new media tools, Grapevine is able to track popularity shifts minute-by-minute during a televised event such as a presidential debate or deliver population-projectable claims on everything from whether there is a growing readiness to disagree with the president on going to war to whether people think pineapple juice should be mixed with cranberry.

Where traditional survey methods took several weeks to generate results, Grapevine's Internet surveys take a few hours. Once people agree to participate in the database, their households are equipped with interactive Web TV devices, which participants then use to fill out questionnaires.⁷ In addition to Web TV, participants also receive free Internet access, an engineer to install their new gadgets, and free prizes. . However, as the saying goes there is no free lunch and, in this case, there is no free 24-7 Web surfing, TV watching, and prize opening. Instead, 24-7, Grapevine tracks the panelists' movements on the Web. This fulfills Grapevine's goal of delivering a 24-7 consumer, tracking the media use (from newspapers to Internet), advertising exposures, attitudes, and purchase behavior of the participants to amass detailed profiles to enrich its information on individuals. The Web TVs deliver consistent multi-media content to the participants/database members and, most notably, embedded database member management and spyware, of which only an advanced Internet user – one who most likely would not agree to be constantly polled in exchange for free Internet access – would understand the meaning. Grapevine summons its respondents by activating a flashing red light on the top of the family's Web TV box. Before data-mining, Grapevine collects -- through database participants' answers -- demographic information, such as income level, sex, race, age, and information related to interests, hobbies, and product/technology usage. If Grapevine software is running off a person's computer instead of Web TV, it also uses cookies, small data files stored on a computer's hard drive, to collect information such as browser, type of computer, operating system,

⁷ A good technical definition of Spyware is provided by Webopedia: "Originally, a general term for a whole category of products and technologies that enable you to surf the Web on your TV. Most WebTV products today consist of a small box that connects to your telephone line and television. It makes a connection to the Internet via your telephone service and then converts the downloaded Web pages to a format that can be displayed on your TV. These products also come with a remote control device so that you can navigate through the Web." Webopedia (2003). Web Tv, Webopedia.

Internet service provider, access times, and other similar information.⁸ In the small print, Grapevine allows users who have their own computer to refuse cookies by turning them off in their browser. Grapevine also claims to release only summarized or non-personally identifiable information to its clients and requires participants' consent prior to releasing any personally identifiable information provided during the survey process. Clients that receive personally identifiable information are required to sign and abide by the standards of disclosure of respondent-identifiable data of the trade association of survey research businesses. However, as a thriving and expanding business that acquires or spins off new companies, business assets, including all survey participant data, are transferred to each new unit. Grapevine has amassed a multi-million member database, with participants hailing from more than 200 countries. Participants also join individual panels based on demographics or interests, such as a musician panel or a teen panel. This subdividing of the database allows Grapevine to offer its clients what it claims to be a valid representation of the entire population via the database, or target populations via the panels.

Some "public interest" activities of Grapevine appear self-serving. For example, Grapevine recently released a poll on Web surfing at work that found one-quarter of employees said they felt addicted to the Internet. The poll was released as part of an 'academic working paper' from some of the company's founders, who were also on faculty at a prominent university. At the same time, Grapevine had released a software package that allowed companies to monitor employees' surfing patterns and block certain sites. Information of this new software was included in press releases on the poll and, in turn, many media organizations published stories on the poll with "news" of the software remedy.

Grapevine plays a problematic role in this new marketplace for political information. First, some of its tactics used to gain and retain participants are misleading. Grapevine initially advertises to prospective database members via its website and ad banners or locates new participants through spider programs and spam. Grapevine then promises participants that expressing their opinion to business and government leaders will greatly influence corporations and government, guiding the way products and services are developed. Grapevine also tells them they will be joining a revolution in research that will irrevocably alter approaches to the collection and application of information, and that as participation is part of a citizen's duty to help good governance. After several months, many panelists forget spyware is installed on their machines. Second, the company

⁸ A good technical definition of Spyware is provided by Webopedia: "A message given to a Web browser by a Web server. The browser stores the message in a text file. The message is then sent back to the server each time the browser requests a page from the server. The main purpose of cookies is to identify users and possibly prepare customized Web pages for them. When you enter a Web site using cookies, you may be asked to fill out a form providing such information as your name and interests. This information is packaged into a cookie and sent to your Web browser which stores it for later use. The next time you go to the same Web site, your browser will send the cookie to the Web server. The server can use this information to present you with custom Web pages. So, for example, instead of seeing just a generic welcome page you might see a welcome page with your name on it. The name cookie derives from UNIX objects called magic cookies. These are tokens that are attached to a user or program and change depending on the areas entered by the user or program." Webopedia (2003). Cookies, Webopedia. **2003**.

simultaneously appeals to a user's sense of citizenship and consumer responsibilities. Members of the database are promised "Vine Points" when they participate that they can redeem for free prizes. At the same time, participants give up the right to see how information about their preferences is used (whether for commercial or public policy analysis). Third, since political information is their marketable product, Grapevine and companies like it take advantage of legal protections for their product. An example of a move in this direction can be found in the dozens of words Grapevine has already trademarked, including "Belief," "Communication," "Connectedness," "Deliberative," "Empathy," "Fairness," "Inclusiveness," and "Learner." Thus, Grapevine conflates the incentive to participate as a consumer with the incentive to participate as a citizen. Moreover, it takes advantage of the exciting rhetoric about new media technologies to collect both political and commercial data from participants who think they are participating in an information revolution and guiding government and corporation policy. Finally, the political information that used to circulate in a public sphere now circulates in a marketplace where it is priced, trademarked, and sold.

B. United Campaigns

United Campaigns is a political action committee (PAC) that provides consulting services to moderate political causes and candidates. The organization was founded in 1999 and currently has about 100 employees and a growing list of partner affinity groups. . Recently, United made a key hire, placing a well-known former U.S. senator as its chief executive of operations and further strengthening its image as a leading political consultancy. While the senator does not have previous experience heading an Internet venture or any other kind of company, he has told journalists that United Campaigns will "alter politics as we know it." United offers access to its key asset, its database of individuals' political information, as well as its own brand of Internet-based software to extract and manipulate database information about specific population demographics.

United's clients include the majority of moderate U.S. senators and representatives, and Democratic and Republican national and state parties. United also provides database information to advocacy organizations, including political action committees, non-profit organizations, and issue-oriented organizations. Its clients combine United's 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. The clients use United's database and software to reach audiences based on demographic, geographic, or political criteria. Its campaign and advocacy clients also use its services to accept, process, authenticate, analyze, and disclose contributions received through the Internet.

The foundation of United's database came from a company that provides free e-mail service that required its subscribers to fill out questionnaires when they created email accounts. The answers from this initial questionnaire supplied United with the demographics of database members, such as age, gender, income, expected major purchases, hobbies, interests, family size, and education. United supplemented this information using spyware to track database members' patterns of computer use. United has significantly evolved its initial database to now include the voter registration

information of more than 150 million registered voters in the United States, as culled from state and local boards of elections. In addition, United combines 50 million individual's records from departments of motor vehicles. Outside the United States, United has begun to build an international database, starting in the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia, with a database that contains registration records of more than 90 million voters. In addition, United continues to run a non-profit Internet service provider from which it gathers subscriber questionnaire information and Internet use information, via cookies and spyware, to add to its database. United's database thus contains information including date of birth, date of voter or motor vehicle registration, residence address, number of children in the household, political jurisdiction, and party affiliation. Through spider software, spam and Spyware, United has found and added email addresses, telephone numbers, estimated income levels, ethnicity of surnames, and homeowner status. United also purchases data from other lobby groups, and its database now contains detailed and growing information on more than 75% of the voting public as well as on hundreds of thousands of unregistered voters.

Like Grapevine, some of United's activities are problematic. First, United has built a relational database using people's detailed personal information without their explicit or informed consent. United uses email registrations, voter registrations, motor vehicle registrations, an individual's movement on the Internet, as well as other undisclosed sources, to amass information that the vast majority of people might not consider public record. In addition, the combination of these various sources of information paints a highly detailed picture of individuals' lives that clients, either political or commercial, can use to uniquely customize messages to manipulate certain responses from each particular individual in the database. Even if some members gave initial informed consent to the use of certain political information, most would not have consented to its continuous aggregation and applications. Already, through United, political organizations and commercial industry are able to drive traffic to their websites by directing customized banner and email advertisements via the political, demographic, and commercial characteristic profiles of members of the database. In addition, in the deals United makes with some of its partners, partners get access to United's database while also sharing their own databases, amassing an even more detailed and widely shared profile of individuals. Voter registration records are governed by complex regulations – more than 25 states, including California, prohibit the commercial use of voter registration records. Yet, as a PAC, United is exempt from many of these restrictions, so its clients, which may include industry lobby groups, may now order political information through its website and have that information delivered as raw data and processed as mailing labels, telephone sheets, walk lists, a polling sample, or a file suitable for import into many popular software programs.

III. The New Market for Political Information

Grapevine and United are two good examples of the kinds of organizations working in the marketplace for political information. One initially buys individuals' personal information and opinions in exchange for Internet access and free prizes, and then continues to mine data on these individuals to build a detail-rich database to market to clients. Another amasses personal information about individuals, from the start

unbeknownst to them and without their permission, using government records, commercial means, and Internet spyware. Grapevine's clients are mostly commercial, but the company is increasingly serving industry lobby groups. United works with political entities but shares information with industry lobby groups that are constituted as PACs. These organizations also are similar in that they both amass and market information about the majority of American voters and non-voters and are beginning to do the same within other countries. New media technologies have made it possible to turn political information into a highly marketable product. That political information is bought and sold is not new. However, the quality of the product and the structure of the market evolved significantly once organizations started using new media technologies to collect and distribute political information.

The Quality of The Political Information Product. For the most part, Grapevine's business comes from clients who want to survey the buying public about commercial products and services and target them with messages. In contrast, United is a much smaller organization, a specialized consultancy for political campaigns. However, both increasingly play an important role in the marketplace for political information, with three kinds of services.⁹ First, when industries and services form political lobby groups, both Grapevine and United help these lobby groups legitimize cause by identifying the needs of group members. A lobby group will often claim to represent firms in an industry and, at the same time, claim to represent the consumers of that industry's goods. Thus information about the importance of the industry to the American economy or to American consumers becomes a source of political legitimacy. Second, both Grapevine and United 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 healthcare?" and pollsters can use basic demographic features to explain variation in responses. Third, both Grapevine and United 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 over 55 years old, living in New York, registered as a Democrat, and spending a significant amount of her income on pharmaceuticals, is very likely to think the government should offer universal healthcare. Moreover, purchases of guns, birth control, or other items can help researchers make indirect inference about a consumer's political attitudes. With new media tools, the research staff at Grapevine and United has amassed so much data from so many sources that the 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 they use new media for their research, they are more likely to contact the right kinds of people for the sample they want, more of the people they contact are likely to agree to participate, and more of the survey is likely to be completed by

⁹ Corporations such as Grapevine and United are very careful to obey state laws that regulate which records can be sold to whom. Even though companies may violate public privacy norms, organizations have legal counsel committed to keeping their work well within the letter and spirit of the law.

respondents. The raw data may be cheaply purchased by anyone through the websites that Grapevine and United maintain, though more advanced analysis and premium data are available at greater costs. In sum, today's commercially available political information is multi-sourced, nuanced, scaled from named individuals and households to residential blocks, zip codes, and electoral districts.

The Structure of the Political Information Market. 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, non-profits and private foundations, political parties, Internet service providers, and PACs. Both Grapevine and United, however, make deliberate efforts to associate with academic research institutions so as to appear more legitimate. They host conferences, have academics publish with their commercially valuable data, and use university names liberally throughout their corporate identity literature. They buy, sell, and trade political information that in its raw form can be cheaply sold to any citizen with internet access. In other forms, aggregated and relational, it is more expensive and priced at a point that only the more high-end lobby groups can afford. The cost of polling has dropped substantially, 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 the prices of political information down, made the product more widely distributed, and made the range of products more diverse - the market for political information is more open than ever before. Ironically, the market for political information has been democratized.

IV. Conclusion: Direct Democracy Through the Market?

With the political application of new media, the market grew to have (1) a more diverse group of actors buying and selling (2) a wider and deeper range of political information. While we have been speaking in the abstract about consumers, citizens, and users, we feel it is important to note that these abstracted individuals are real people. All too often the literature that searches for positive, negative, or neutral political implications of new media tools also speaks of abstracted, isolated technology users and misses interesting changes in the qualities of political information and the structure of the market in political information. While the majority of readers of this article are profiled by companies such as Grapevine and United, at least four of every ten readers are well-profiled by 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.

Although Grapevine Polling and United Campaigns are composites with pseudonyms, managers of real companies are known to envision "a world in which politicians become so well informed about public opinion that there is no need for direct democracy" (Lewis 2001). Grapevine is, after all, an international firm, and it already offers political information and tools in other countries. United has also begun to collaborate internationally, starting in the UK, Canada, and Australia; it sees 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 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; Poster 1990; Poster 1995; Foucault 1999), but 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 the social organization that has legitimate control of both the machinery of violence and the machinery of surveillance, but we find that increasingly other entities have purview over political information. With new media, both political and commercial organizations conduct political surveillance of citizenry. Even though individuals' identities and opinions are bought and sold in the 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 does violence to the public sphere, restricting our future supplies of political information based on assumptions of the opinions and identities of our past. Increasingly, we find that 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.

V. References

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