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## **Managing the Digital News Cyclone: Power, Participation, and Political Production Strategies**

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This research investigates the perspectives and practices of political consultants dealing with the information abundance, speed, and participatory culture of today's communication environment. Drawing upon in-depth interviews with 38 elite operatives, this article illuminates their roles in and strategies for managing news cycles, designing campaign output, and utilizing social media opportunities. It charts their thinking and demonstrates how they have adapted and evolved in their designs on communication power as older media logics persist and inform their tactics for political production in newer media spaces.

*Keywords: political consultants, technological change, power relations, news cycle, social media*

The landscape for political communication has been reshaped by the development of new media technologies, with information becoming more plentiful and social media enabling widespread interactivity in the 21st century. It is crucial to understand these patterns through the strategic lens of consultants whose job it is to advise candidates and leaders in navigating that changing media environment. Drawing upon interviews with these elite operatives, this research examines a reformulation of their power through the perspectives they harbor and the practices they employ. Attempting to manage (and cope with) accelerating political information cycles, their efforts reinforce many long-standing principles of campaign strategy and "older media logics" (Chadwick, 2013, p. 209) while nonetheless situating them into newer convergence platforms and coproduced opportunities. The conclusions here demonstrate how "information technology mediates and modifies power relationships" (Karpf, 2012, p. 158) rather than overthrowing them.

### **Power Relations in Politics**

The control of information and communication has always been central to the pursuit and efficacy of power, which Manuel Castells (2011) defines as "the relational capacity that enables a social actor to influence asymmetrically the decisions of other social actor(s)" (p. 10). "Mass self-communication," as

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Castells (2011) terms the many-to-many, social media forms flourishing in the early 21st century, illustrates the potential for "counter-power." Thus, to build consent and exercise control in the digital world, one must deploy "network formation and network strategies of offense and defense" (p. 49).

Andrew Chadwick's (2013) analysis of today's "hybrid system" similarly suggests that power represents the mobilization of interdependent media resources and that "timeliness and the mastery of temporal rhythms" (p. 18) are essential, if understudied, factors in exercising that power. Chadwick (2013) advocates examining power relations from the "inside"—"by exploring concrete interactions and exchanges among social actors, and how media are used in and come to shape" (p. 16) them—to draw out the "media logics," or sense-making processes, that factor into everyday political practice and inform decisions about the production of strategic discourse (e.g., "what goes where" (p. 20) or, as explored here, *when*). Relevant is the notion of participatory "spreadable" media—that "shift from distribution to circulation" (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013, p. 2) endemic to digital culture experience—that relies on grassroots amateurs to add meaning and value to the sharing of content. Although this signals a loss of formal "control" by traditional producers, some forecast benefit, and perhaps even necessity, as they become "increasingly dependent on networked communities to circulate, curate, and appraise their output" (ibid., p. 294).

During the first generation of Web politics in the 1990s, campaigns were reluctant to embrace the interactive potential of the new medium, fearing losing control of the message (Stromer-Galley, 2000). Yet as the line between amateur and professional has blurred in the media world more broadly, the cocreative schemes of "convergence culture" have attempted to situate the agency of productive audiences to further industrial agendas (Deuze, 2007). In the political realm, Philip Howard (2005), documents early "astroturfed" strategies of "artificially seeded social movements" (p. 170) to manage narrowcast campaigns. More recently, Daniel Kreiss (2012a) describes how Obama's 2008 campaign funneled messaging through "netroots" supporters—"seeding" new media outlets, strategically providing content to their network of allies and new online journalistic sites in the attempt to influence the general interest press" (p. 205). Even Howard Dean's 2004 primary campaign, widely lauded for mobilizing technology to cultivate an egalitarian feeling of co-ownership among supporters, was largely a product of "leveraging [that] networked sociality toward the strategic ends of the campaign" (Kreiss, 2009, p. 289) through a "24-hour alternative messaging service that was highly responsive" (p. 286). In sum, social media does not necessarily spell "the dissolution of elite control" but rather "the creation of more porous elite networks and the development of new 'peer-produced' tactical repertoires" (Karpf, 2010, p. 145).

### **Saturated and Accelerated Information Contexts**

Bruce Bimber (2003) theorizes that technological revolutions have transformed information regimes and, in turn, the structures of political power throughout American history. The 21st-century Internet era is defined by "information abundance," featuring cheaper, more symmetrical channels of distribution, whose consequences for older institutions and processes include not just increased volume but greater complexity and nonlinearity. To manage information and thus wield power, this shifting media ecology demands "less rigidly structured, more malleable, and more responsive" (Bimber, 2003, p. 102) political organizing.

These imperatives are driven in no small part by the accelerated information context in which political communication and campaigning now take place. In his study of convergence newsmaking under market pressures, Eric Klinenberg (2005) reports journalists' deep frustration at being forced to produce more cross-platform content with fewer staff resources, particularly against the backdrop of what he labels a "news cyclone": that "erratic" and "unending" churn from newer media competitors that have "eliminated the temporal borders in the news day, creating an informational environment in which there is always breaking news to produce" (p. 54).

Chadwick (2011) further conceptualizes how power functions within these compressed "political information cycles," where "online activists and news professionals are now routinely engaged in loosely coupled assemblages characterized by conflict, competition, partisanship, and mutual dependency" (p. 19). Within the hybrid system, while older media still retain much power thanks to their size, centrality, and resources, the risk taking of online publishers and the virality of social media create new interdependencies.

Viral content indeed seems to circulate "with exponentially greater speed and scope" (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 12) in networked culture. One by-product of this is what David Perlmutter (2006) calls "hypericons"—that is, news content (and, specifically, images) that are "instantly available, globally disseminated . . . and, perhaps, also fleeting in public consciousness" (p. 55) as competitive pressures compel novelty and turnover. Over a half-century, we have seen a tremendous—now almost instantaneous—compression of time from media captured to audience dissemination, which has consistently thwarted the mechanisms of political and journalistic control (Perlmutter, 2006). Simultaneously, candidate sound bites have shrunk from more than 40 seconds to less than 10 (Hallin, 1992). Some have thus suggested that Internet time, in general, might be faster than "normal human time" (Wellman, 2001, p. 2034), perhaps owing to Moore's Law, a prediction that computing capacity doubles with regularity. And because "Internet-enabled political organizing moves *fast*" (Karpf, 2012, p. 5), the political system as a whole "moves faster and becomes noisier as a result of the ongoing incentive to innovate" (p. 163).

Based upon the aforementioned—perhaps unique—cases, scholars have posited that such news cycle acceleration, increasingly participatory networked culture, and "older" and "newer" media logics remain intertwined. This article uses interviews to determine whether and how these phenomena, themes, and practices might be substantiated across a wider range of political actors—many of whom might be seen as more mainstream and establishment than the comparative outliers of the earlier literature.

### Method

This examination requires going behind the scenes to study how political actors who produce campaign content are responding to central "technological developments . . . driving changes in the strategies and techniques they use to communicate" (Young, Bourne, & Younane, 2007, p. 50). As demand for their services has grown into a multibillion-dollar business (and as party bosses' influence has comparatively waned), consultants have overtaken campaigns, and some argue that the personnel whom politicians tap to play these roles might ultimately determine the politicians' success or failure on Election

Day (Trent, Friedenber, & Denton, 2011). This research therefore takes a "source-centered approach" to political communication, in that it "focuses attention on the active role in shaping media content played by those who provide the source material" (McNair, 2011, p. xvi). The project also builds upon Kreiss' (2012b) account of Democrats' new media strategies as they have evolved in the early 21st century.

I contacted 108 possible participants in the second half of 2012—during the height of the U.S. election season (Serazio, 2014). The targets derived from both purposive and snowball sampling—techniques considered useful for a "relatively limited," "hard-to-reach," and "somewhat interconnected" group like campaign consultants (Schutt, 2004). From the 108 possible participants, I ultimately conducted 38 one-on-one, in-depth interviews running, on average, 37 minutes each.

Two key informants (prior friendships with the press secretaries for a Democratic presidential candidate and a Republican congressional representative) granted interviews and introduced me to some of their colleagues. Snowball sampling then generated roughly half of the total number of interviews conducted; others (whose names popped up in media coverage as relevant and noteworthy) were cold-contacted with a brief e-mail explaining the research and inquiring about their interest. I intentionally sought a range of vantage points to contribute to the research questions and collected data from an even number of Republicans and Democrats. Further, I aimed to include participants with a mix of professional capacities, including nine general consultants, seven communication directors, seven advertising producers, and eight digital specialists, as well as other, even more specific roles sprinkled throughout, such as media buying, speechwriting, blogging, and opposition research. Most interviewees were Washington, DC-based and worked at the higher echelons of political communication on behalf of national parties and individual candidates (i.e., in national and state races, at the congressional and presidential levels). The sample also offered a diverse range of ages and career lengths, from recent college graduates to those with decades of campaign experience, though most were in their 30s and 40s and all but two were men.

The interviewees generally fell into one of four categories. The *communication directors* evaluated incoming media requests; worked with reporters, mostly off the record; prepared clients for interviews; and created written content, ranging from press releases to official tweets—on behalf of mostly congressional representatives. The *advertising producers* were involved in conceptualizing, writing, shooting, and editing political advertisements and, because most served as heads of their respective agencies, operated at a higher level—and therefore in closer contact with campaign clients such as presidential aspirants—than more hands-on, technical staff members across those dimensions. The *digital specialists* managed various Internet operations, including database targeting, website development, online advertising buying, viral tactics, and fund-raising infrastructure. The *general consultants* all ran firms explicitly titled "strategic" or "media consulting"; they adopted the most big-picture approach to political communication—offering advice and developing overall strategy for campaigns, fusing research with broad messaging themes, and coordinating press relations with advertising plans on behalf of

presidential and congressional competitors. Most interviewees played different roles at different times for different clients across these four categories.<sup>2</sup>

### **Strategizing Temporal Rhythms**

#### ***Reactive Power***

From the vantage point of campaign consultants, the information abundance of today's communication environment is also driving an acceleration of political content through it. These developments make control—the central challenge of such operatives vis-à-vis journalists and the public—all the more complex and difficult and generates a sense of reactive power as much as any proactive equivalent. One opposition research firm's president summarized the impact of that sense of haste on consultants as the news cycle compresses; his depiction might be read as analogous to Moore's Law, with more political information being culturally processed and requiring management nowadays:

The time you've actually had to come up with a sound, coherent strategy [to respond to something], it's gone from a day and a half to several hours to an hour to, even now, I mean, you can kind of take back a tweet, but the minute that information goes out and gets out now, you barely have any time to actually—to verify, for lack of a better term, to get your shit together before whatever it is [goes] out into the ether. (personal interview, June 13, 2012)

Conversations revealed interviewees grasping for a more accurate label than "24-hour news cycle" (the nomenclature of old) as the temporal framework within which to situate their practices. None of the interviewees mentioned "news cyclone," but "news time line" and "24-minute news cycle" were variously volunteered as better expressions of the shift from "regular" to "constant" deadlines for shepherding political content—a shift largely attributed to the rise of blogs and other online news outlets. The notion of a cycle, after all, implies predictable recurrence, which is not what interviewees experience; their routines have been upended in nonlinear ways. And just as Klinenberg (2005) captured an exhausted frustration among journalists at having to keep pace with the demands of digital information production, so, too, are those anxieties mirrored in the experience of their political counterparts. Because of this, one U.S. Senate press secretary expressed nostalgia for a less immediate, round-the-clock era of political information management:

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<sup>2</sup> This diversity of participants precluded asking the exact same set of formal survey questions in all the interviews; rather, participants were asked about their particular and nuanced experiences. Nonetheless, here are some of the specific queries: In a typical day or week, what are your activities and roles and when do you execute them? In your experience, how have the news cycle and campaign time line changed and affected your work? What thinking and planning are given to the sound-bite format of news? How do you use social media and engage with the sharing of content? What media strategies do you use to enlist grassroots support? How is the production process different for TV versus online content?

It used to be when the evening news cycle ran, after the nightly networks newscast, everyone was done for the day, and no one would call you after seven o'clock at night. Now you have people filing throughout the day, every day, and there's no such thing as a hard deadline anymore. It's just constant. In the past, the press worked toward one deadline a day. . . . A journalist's job is harder than it was fifteen years ago, and, in turn, my job is harder, because they're trying to file all day long. So there's just a lot of pressure to respond to inquiries very quickly, and they might file a couple versions of the story where, in the past, you only worried about one story coming out. (personal interview, August 2, 2012)

The temporal work experience described here is, in essence, the difference between information management in a mass communication environment and information management in today's new media ecology—a structural shift from predictable, parceled-out dimensions to constant, relentless fluidity. Unlike a morning newspaper or prime-time network TV, online political content has no comparative restrictions on time or space; it can exist in potentially boundless form, digitally unshackled from former parameters such as column inches or segment length. The Web, in other words, does not replicate the experience of consistently allotted deadlines and limits of cultural production. Moreover, as greater numbers of participants in political communication have entered the space, relative to a generation ago, competitive pressure accelerates to post installments constantly.

One presidential candidate's press secretary likened his typically frantic role to being an "emergency room doctor" just trying to "keep the patient [his client] alive," for "there was just too much to absorb and too much incoming on any given day" (personal interview, June 12, 2012). Similarly, the vice president of a digital strategy firm said his pace operated at "an hour-to-hour activity," with "four or five messaging wars in a single given day" (personal interview, November 16, 2012). And because the information cycle is no longer apportioned by that limited number of gatekeepers working within a constrained amount of time or space, news feels more like "real time," as the head of one presidential campaign's digital team described it: "From a digital guy's perspective, that's great, because that's always the way we've operated. If you're a traditional communicator, then you're probably screwed a little bit" (personal interview, November 27, 2012).

This is not to say, however, that amid the chaos, rapidity, and bounty of new media-driven politics, some old media logics of proactive information management do not persist. From a weekly perspective, late Friday afternoon continues to represent the optimal moment to release or announce unfavorable content (the "bad news dump" time, as one interviewee called it) (personal interview, September 5, 2012). Across the full duration of a campaign, early efforts at character definition—particularly for lesser known competitors—remain critical, and more negative messaging are back-loaded closer to Election Day. As one media consultant described:

Campaigns typically start off with beautiful biographical ads that may have taken a day or two to shoot and you have a month to put together. By the end of the campaign, you are just in a knife fight and you have twelve hours to respond, and you have, like, a headline, a mug shot, and a voiceover. . . . It becomes less artistic, so to speak, and more functional. . . . Of course [that] political advertising sucks, because there's these

massive disparities in terms of production values and the lead time to produce [compared to other commercials]. (personal interview, December 6, 2012)

In part, the logic of this strategy is itself reactive in terms of power relations. It is driven by a widely held belief that voters simply do not pay attention to campaign races until the very end and that competitors should conserve their production resources (or “burn rate,” in one insider’s terms) until that time (personal interview, September 10, 2012). As the director of a political advertising agency said:

One thing I try to impress upon candidates is how absolutely—what an infinitesimal interest people have in politics. . . . Especially if you’re not, like, a month before the election. . . . People—the real people in this country—really just don’t pay attention. (personal interview, September 21, 2012)

### ***Quantity of Output***

Just as the convergence journalists portrayed in Klinenberg’s (2005) account share with consultants a frenetic despair at the temporal conditions now allotted for their work, so, too, do they also voice similar expectations about needing to produce more in that reduced time frame. New technologies of production and distribution are collapsing the output cycle—increasing quantity and decreasing quality as ads (and other forms of political communication) become cheaper and, therefore, faster to create and exhibit thanks to lower-cost software and free online venues. With expedited digital media assembly and delivery, now “you can make an ad within an hour,” one analyst at a media buying firm observed (personal interview, November 13, 2012). Indeed, one member of a presidential campaign’s advertising team described an example of this when, one midnight after browsing his BlackBerry e-mail in bed, he ran across an opponent’s gaffe, grabbed an editor, and “had this thing [the ad] cranked out and doing the approvals in 90 minutes . . . and obviously you could float it up on the Internet very quickly” (personal interview, December 11, 2012).

This quicker turnaround and more abundant, continuous stream of online political content simultaneously lowers expectations. One interviewee said the Internet represented “a great testing ground” for cheap political ads, because even “if it’s a dud,” little money is wasted on the media buy, and, “if it gets so much attention that it creates controversy, it’s, like, a good problem” (personal interview, June 21, 2012). Alternatively, another lamented that the Web was being treated as a “graveyard of poor spots, just because it was considered a method of free” distribution (personal interview, December 19, 2012); a third suggested that “attention-grabbing” Web video was increasingly supplanting (and perhaps doing the work of) the press release or story pitch tactic of old (personal interview, November 8, 2012).

Overall, when producing campaign content for YouTube as opposed to network TV, a newer media logic emerges. In 2012, campaigns and their political action committee surrogates more aggressively enlisted incendiary Internet spots to break through the commercial clutter—including one infamous Priorities USA ad that implied Mitt Romney was to blame for a woman’s death, which only aired online but nonetheless generated much mainstream media buzz over the broadcast airwaves as well (Henderson & Nakamura, 2012). Discussing an outlandish, \$5,000-budget, presidential attack ad that



borrowed from horror film motifs and garnered reaction from *Politico*, cable news, and *The Wall Street Journal* (yet was also never exhibited beyond YouTube), the chief creative officer of a media consulting firm acknowledged, “We sat there understanding that the ad was never going to make it on TV, but that we could drive the news content with our messaging—we could get those [million] views out there” (personal interview, December 19, 2012). This is not to suggest, however, that increased output necessarily breeds more negative content; it is simply that the genre mores of mainstream broadcast culture differ from those of online video, where expectations about niche diversity perhaps loosen norms and undercut decorum. As one media consultant—and self-described “pioneer of viral media” who produced several edgy, multimillion-viewed online spots—further explained:

I think there’s less limitations or you can be more provocative online. You can be more even, say, creative or outrageous, or you would do things online that you might not do on television. . . . If it’s a voter who is tooling around on the Internet and they see maybe kind of a wacky ad for or against a candidate, it’s not quite the same if you are on broadcast during, say, the news and you have a family that’s having their dinner and there’s just a different sensibility. . . . Being online, there’s more sort of an openness or sort of a Wild West quality to that. (personal interview, December 6, 2012)

In sum, the information abundance of the digital media space has amplified pressure on campaign consultants to produce and manage political content faster and in greater volume. This is consonant with broader trends seen in commercial culture: “Content creators are often making their communication more frequent, more timely, and more responsive to particular audiences” (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 299) because they simply do not know what will catch on and what will fade into the cacophony of competing digital output. In the 2012 election, another concrete manifestation of this pattern was campaigns’ increasing deployment of Twitter to immediately disseminate a message following a live interview, in response to the opposition, or even in the middle of a debate—often trying to establish the spin mid-narrative, before a given media event had even concluded (Hart, 2012).

On one hand, some consultants noted, the effect of information abundance on news cyclone velocity is that clients’ gaffes and scandals could shuffle in and out of the public spotlight quicker as well, cultivating a perceived short-term collective memory among citizenry that is beneficial when under attack: “Everyone’s going to know about [a bad story] very quickly, but at the same time, because of the velocity, the news media must introduce new stories into the mix. If there’s nothing new, they’ve moved onto another topic,” the press secretary for a former U.S. Senate leader pointed out (personal interview, June 18, 2012). On the other hand, if a consultant is trying to push a story into the political information cycle—given the anticipated dynamics of this “need for consumption” among press and public across “a series of conversations going on all day”—he or she might trickle out and “spin off updates” every few hours to feed the momentum rather than present the full narrative in a single installment (personal interview, June 18, 2012).

Here again, certain older media logics and principles of political communication endure—chiefly, the need for reductive message discipline amid the increased output and clutter of the contemporary information environment. When political consultants first emerged in the 1930s in a comparatively

straightforward, predictable news environment, they stressed simplicity and reiteration to clients (Lepore, 2012). Though the tools to achieve those goals have changed dramatically in recent years, that emphasis remains more paramount than ever, as one congressional press secretary underscored: "You gotta say something until you're so absolutely sick of it, you may throw up if you say it one more time—and that's when you've gotten to the point that people may have heard it" (personal interview, June 4, 2012). Because he knows the press trades in those sound bites, the senior speechwriter for a U.S. presidential campaign said he very deliberately scripts that way to feed them. And that premium on being succinct, according to one congressional deputy chief of staff, both drives and is driven by Twitter as an emergent platform for discourse: "A tweet by the majority leader will often get more pickup, because it will be retweeted and will be quoted in newspaper articles . . . [more] than a longer statement" (personal interview, September 5, 2012).

At the more extreme end of this trend, the medium might actually be reformatting the message toward shallower policy ends. Take the director of new media for Herman Cain, the brief, almost-viral front-runner for the GOP nomination, who proudly boasted, "Mitt Romney's 59-point plan can't fit in a tweet. . . . On the flipside, it's very easy for someone to post about 9-9-9," (DeLo, 2011, para. 10), Cain's simplistic tax policy. Twitter, as both a medium of and larger metaphor for contemporary political discourse, may be frustrating at times for strategists, but they understand the need to adapt or lose, as the president of a direct-mail and opposition research firm explained:

I don't think you can have a very high-level, let's say, kind of senior tutorial and college-level debate on Facebook and Twitter. . . . It's not because the folks using it lack sophistication. I just think it's really tough to talk about foreign policy . . . in 120 or however many letters you're able to use. . . . What is moving on Twitter are kind of macro-level thematics. . . . Quick, macro-level hits that are easily digestible that could easily be forwarded around so that everyone understands. . . . You're not going to want to retweet someone's position stance on ethanol or something like that. You know—it's gotta be something short and sweet that's got a little bit of sexiness to it. (personal interview, September 17, 2012)

### **Participatory Culture Tactics**

#### ***Monitoring Cocreators***

The study of political consultants' social media practices—and their strategic decentralization of campaign activity—includes both outputs and inputs (or, in Castells' [2011], terms, offensive and defensive tactics of power). As to the latter, the vast abundance of online content, particularly in user-generated spaces, can serve as a sprawling, complex source of potential material to take into account. One member of a presidential campaign's advertising team revealed how social media is considered a key means of monitoring the discourse of cocreative participants and, in turn, a helpful, unique slice of public opinion:

Every day in our polling meeting, every single day, we looked at some data points regarding conversations on the Internet. It was sort of a collection of things from Twitter and other blog posts and everything else combined into one data point. We would watch: what's trending; what's not trending; what's trending for us; and what's trending against us. . . . The ability to control that or affect that was huge! (personal interview, December 11, 2012)

For example, one congressional press secretary who said he thinks of Twitter, first and foremost, as a "surveillance tool" (in part because such social media generates a much-needed "unfiltered conversation" for Beltway insiders), reported that his boss starts each day by simply browsing comments and feedback on his Facebook page (personal interview, June 4, 2012). He added that Twitter offered a new way to watch issues emerge and stories spread—keeping close tabs, in particular, on Capitol Hill reporters' output to "head [brush fires] off before they wind up in the next morning's paper." The 2012 Romney campaign reportedly monitored Twitter especially closely, with top aides keeping hashtag streams open all day long, hunting for journalistic bias, and quickly analyzing data for news cycle patterns. As Romney's digital director remarked, "It's a leading indicator of what people are thinking about . . . almost like an early warning signal" (Parker, 2012, para. 9). The chief blogger for a presidential campaign illuminated this strategy in greater detail:

The way an article gets written nowadays—you know, a reporter might tweet something early in the day and you can kind of already get a sense of what they're writing about. And, you know, by tweeting back at them and attacking them if [they're writing] something you think is false or whatever and getting other people in the Twitter community, you can actually influence the way the article might come out. (personal interview, December 7, 2012)

For professional flacks, this scrutinizing and badgering of reporters represents old media logic and power relations emboldened and accelerated by new media tools. But perhaps even more important than monitoring the press is the way in which new media increasingly capacitate the surveillance of political rivals. One opposition research specialist noted that, thanks to technological change over the course of his two decades in the business, there is now voluminous more information to sort through, but, at the same time, database archives for voting records, staff salaries and expenses, lobbying reports, and committee hearings have all migrated online, replacing inefficient on-site library digging. At the presidential campaign level, numerous staffers were devoted to combing the Internet for news stories, video reels, and speeches, "monitoring every blip and burp from the opponents, constantly on the lookout for vulnerabilities, flip-flops, gaffes—ammo" (Hagan, 2012, para. 44). To that end, social media offers operatives another appealing avenue for research, as the president of a direct mail and opposition research firm pointed out:

We've already been able to lock in [opponents] in their issue positions based off of their tweets and . . . things they've said on Facebook. . . . You might not have made a statement in a newspaper or cast a vote or said anything to a reporter or news anchor . . . but you tweeted [something] . . . and as far as we're concerned, there you go:

There's a position you've taken on a major issue. (personal interview, September 17, 2012)

For several years, one of the more cutting-edge fronts in the battle for opposition surveillance has involved the deployment of lightweight recording technologies by low-level staffers and even unaffiliated audience members on the campaign trail. More participants can now capture and circulate that content, thanks to smart-phone and hosting platform advances. Reflecting on a fund-raiser recording of Mitt Romney in which he infamously disparaged an alleged 47% of government-dependent Americans, the president of a political advertising agency noted that such material would never have surfaced in previous decades (much less have been disseminated so swiftly), because the means to record it would have been too cumbersome and obvious to "smuggle" in (personal interview, September 18, 2012). Out in the field, campaigns and super-PACs stalk candidates, "recording their every word and then feeding it back to headquarters to be tagged, catalogued, and archived"—a digital-political panoptic experiment of "live-feed video from trackers, allowing central command to instantly replay a clip moments after it happened, meaning a campaign could theoretically create rapid-response videos all day long" (Hagan, 2012, para. 49). One opposition specialist detailed how that process has "changed tremendously":

Now, you can wirelessly communicate with kids all over the state—you don't have to send them much in the way of equipment, because so many things are cheap. They can get stuff on their phone if need be. . . . You can upload it in a short period of time—no transcribing necessary because you filed the video and you can send it to reporters directly. (personal interview, September 18, 2012)

One media buying analyst summarized this ease of recording as the "democratization of technology"—the prospect that, even as an amateur, "I can make something on my flip-cam that you can put on cable television" (personal interview, November 13, 2012). The example that often springs to mind as the fruit of such tracking is U.S. Senate candidate George Allen, who was caught referring to a videographer with an ethnic slur, but, as an opposition research firm's president pointed out, such "macaca moments" are much more rare than compiling and assembling footage from primary appearances to document a "pattern of extremism in candidates" (personal interview, June 13, 2012). In that sense, with more "eyes in the sky," as he put it, it also becomes more difficult to avoid being caught issuing contradictory positions. Before, such watchdogging for consistency was only feasible if the same reporter happened to be at multiple events, but now a kind of crowd-sourced dragnet for ideological consistency can be arranged. Said one digital strategist:

Candidates have to be more disciplined, because events are taped that can go online, and you can't go out to the gun club and tell them, "Oh, I love guns." And then go to the library and say that you're for gun control, which a lot of people probably did in the past. (personal interview, June 21, 2012)

As one opposition specialist explained, this constant scrutiny contributes to a state of paranoia within campaigns:

There's nothing off the record anymore—nothing. Someone always has a phone; someone always has a camera. There's nothing that you should say that should not—the old line was, "Don't write anything that you don't want on the front page of *The New York Times*." That has changed to, "Don't say anything." And you have to prep your candidate for the onslaught of new technology. . . . People now have scrub Facebook [clean]—not only their Facebook pages but the Facebook pages of their family members, because all that is now in the public sphere and that didn't exist ten years ago. (personal interview, September 19, 2012)

As Chadwick (2011) noted, "The presence of vast searchable online archives of news content means that stories or fragments of stories can lay dormant for weeks or even months before new pieces of information erupt and are integrated into the cycle" (p. 8). Such "archival news" content might well be buried in a social media feed and resurface with the help of an enterprising crowd-source. Clearly, this participatory culture arrangement favors neither consultant nor journalist nor public in terms of dominance but, rather, finds them working cooperatively and competitively—and, above all, reactively—depending on the context.

### ***Outsourcing Enthusiasm***

Consultants are also obviously exploring ways of using user-generated content to go on the offense by implanting their message across social media and optimizing the potential for spreadability. In 2012, for example, the head of digital operations and social media for Newt Gingrich's campaign would reach out to voters in South Carolina who posted favorably on Twitter about guns: "I'll e-mail them links and press releases and stories. . . . Almost every day, I'm pushing a bunch of that out to them, and they're pushing a bunch of our message out to the public" (Parker, 2012, para. 18).

Part of what makes a space like social media appealing for these tactics, a congressional press secretary explained, is that it can serve as a *nonpolitical* context for embedding political strategy: "People go on it to look at pictures of their cousin's kids, and if they run across something political while they're doing that . . . you can kind of surprise people. . . . [They] don't have their ideological blinkers on" (personal interview, June 4, 2012). The president of a political advertising agency elaborated that his target audience, when thinking about, say, Facebook output, is the "uninformed people who happen to vote, who frankly aren't people looking for political information or data online . . . [who] aren't seeking things out" (personal interview, November 16, 2012).

This obfuscation of intent is at the theoretical heart of guerrilla marketing. Moreover, "grassroots field functions as power, because . . . it seems to operate furthest from the appearance of it; constitutionally, it seems to 'rise up' *from* the people rather than being imposed *upon* them" (Serazio, 2013a, p. 105, italics in original). Campaign consultants thus express a desire to worm into word-of-mouth, knowing that, as the chief creative officer at a media consultancy put it:

I can never do an ad that is more effective than one friend telling another friend something. Because they have way more credibility than I do and way more interest level and you pay attention to your friend. They send you an e-mail, you're going to open it and read it and so forth. And so I think part of what we try to do is think a lot less like a political candidate and much more like somebody who is just having a conversation with a neighbor or a friend. (personal interview, December 19, 2012)

Once more, the media logic here (person-to-person recommendations are most persuasive) is by no means new, but "in the past, you were never really able to do that in an easy way," which social media's decentralized scale has now afforded, noted the president of political advertising agency (personal interview, December 5, 2012). As part of wider ambitions by the advertising industry to colonize these spaces, consultants are eagerly pursuing the recruitment of evangelists there, which represents, as he puts it, "the holy grail for campaigns" (ibid.). One telling example of this rhetoric comes from the chief blogger for a presidential campaign, who described how he tried to "crowd-source" the campaign narrative through the personal experiences of supporters on the official blog—filtering the top-down message through bottom-up "amateur" interlocutors:

It was sort of the opposite of what other campaigns did on their blogs. Other campaigns were talking about how great their candidate was or, you know, shitting on the opponent. . . . [We were] kind of zooming in on individuals who are part of this mass movement and telling their specific stories about why they decided to get involved. . . . It was about telling a story that was different from the official campaign communication team's story. . . . It was a movement of people who are, in a sense, becoming their own micro [versions of the candidate]. (personal interview, December 7, 2012)

Consultants had few easy answers, however, for solving the riddle of engineering spreadability. Lamenting his own power, the vice president of a digital strategy firm said:

One of the biggest frustrations of being in my business is everybody wants me to make something go viral, and I just don't have a formula for that. And I feel like the longer I'm in this business, the less I understand what actually is going to work. (personal interview, November 16, 2012)

Controversy and timeliness might be prerequisites, but, he confided (in an estimate he surely avoids mentioning to clients), 70% of any viral success is probably luck.

Nonetheless, images should be understood as essential in maximizing viral potential and outsourcing campaign texts. As consultants perceive attention spans in perpetual decline amid a cluttered media landscape competing for eyeballs, they are discovering about sharing on the Web what TV specialists have long known: Visuals trump words. Yet that flighty focus anticipated among audiences meant that even short videos can be seen as too stodgy and less effective than alternative visual vehicles for political content. One online advertising firm's president posited:

People's attention spans have become so limited that they're not really interested in watching a video so much as they are interested in sharing, like, a graphic—something that literally doesn't take seconds of their time, but milliseconds of their time. I think we've seen that with the rise of the meme graphics that we've seen in this cycle. . . . [If I] include videos for [a Facebook] page, even if they're compelling and interesting, I don't get nearly the number of shares, likes, or comments than if I posted an image. . . . For this cycle, it has really gone back to the image versus the video in terms of viral. (personal interview, September 10, 2012)

Another president of a political advertising agency confirmed that "one-frame, photographic digital memes" and "postage stamp-sized visual memes" had the most success, in terms of political content, traversing those shareable spaces online: "One of the things we found in the last election cycle is that attention spans can be so minute that really the fastest way of communicating something is the best way" (personal interview, December 5, 2012). To that end, both presidential campaigns in 2012 utilized photos created by fans, though the Obama campaign was reportedly more savvy and invested in promoting user-generated GIFs, those brief, quirky digital video clips that play in a loop (Wortham, 2012). In that sense, the viral popularity of the GIF format in 2012 might be considered the Twitterization of online video—with complexity similarly abridged.

The associate manager for policy at a social networking company confirmed that imagery and infographics represented the most dependable communicative tactics for eliciting engagement in viral spaces: "Everything's so much more visual on the Web now. Being able to take what you're trying to say and put it into some sort of more graphical format is huge" (personal interview, December 19, 2012). Once again, the underlying premise here—simple, repetitive images and phrases—is by no means a new phenomenon in politics, but, rather, shows how "*newer media practices* . . . adapt and integrate the logics of older media practices" (Chadwick, 2013, p. 4, italics in original). The unconstrained digital media environment—unlike the mass broadcasting confines that preceded it—does not, of course, require such reductive discipline and could, as optimists once hoped, furnish both the time and space for political depth; yet the information abundance endemic to that ecology seems to pressure participants to cling to those old schemes and logics for content management and cultural production. Visual memes may well turn out to be the sound-bite equivalent for strategizing such viral politics.

### Conclusion

It's very difficult to control—to keep everything on track. . . . External events can really mess with your strategy absolutely. It's how you react to those events and how you can try to keep folding those events into your [strategy]—how you can be malleable and turn on a dime and figure it out is what's key here. (personal interview, June 18, 2012)

The lament of this press secretary for a U.S. Senate leader is an apt summation of the consultant perspective on relationships of media power in an era of political communication defined by speed and increased network participation: an interdependent give-and-take between campaign professionals, journalists, and cocreative audiences. Managing the digital news cyclone, then, might be understood in

two ways: a portrait of the offensive and defensive practices by which elites seek to control the political narrative (e.g., managing as leading) and a portrait of their challenges and frustrations given transformations to the accelerated time and expanded space in which that narrative is fought out (e.g., managing as coping with). As shown here, many older media logics persist in the new hybrid system, where social media vies for power with traditional broadcast producers.

The media environment for political communication has clearly shifted in recent decades: What was once an ecology of scarcity (with a limited number of gatekeepers participating and time and space constraints constricting the message) has given way to an era of information abundance. Yet, as this research has shown of the production strategies employed by campaign consultants, changes in technology are not necessarily rendering the fundamental principles of political communication obsolete. Conversations with elite operatives reveal designs on a public sphere digitally formatted toward brevity, imagery, and superficiality—some of the same tendencies that have long plagued politics.

Critics have long accused the 24/7 immediacy of cable news of contributing to a kind of “CNN effect,” in which distant events unfold on television quicker than policy makers can formulate in-depth, thoughtful responses to them (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 1999). Yet in the broadcast heyday, news cycle time was still parceled out more predictably (i.e., starting and ending in clear daily or weekly increments) than the accelerated real-time flow of information that strategists have come to expect—and need to direct—online. With the increasing centrality of the Internet in setting the pace of public discourse, the rhythm of political life has been compacted, conditioning communication toward even greater haste and pithiness, where simplicity is now potentially prized in the very construction of policy (e.g., formatting a tax plan to fit within 140 characters). The “fastest way of communicating something” might be great in scoring electoral victories, as one consultant touted (personal interview, December 5, 2012), but that reductive repetition seems less optimal for achieving an informed polis, healthy democracy, and sage governance.

This research also has indicated how social media is being enlisted not just in the service of pure, grassroots populism but also as crowd-sourced surveillance and astroturfed ambitions. This does not invalidate the egalitarian ideals that have fueled campaigns from Howard Dean to Ron Paul; it simply complicates and enriches any analysis of how those platforms might be conceptualized and judged. Just as average citizens are enjoying the avenues for expression and activism that social media afford, so, too, are political elites eager to exploit them. Although campaigns in the 1990s might have shied away from online opportunities for fear of losing control, campaigners in the 21st century have been adapting to that interactive unpredictability: working through user-generated content by seeding campaign messages and monitoring the opposition through cutting-edge technological means. Political content, in this sense, is treated as more incomplete, as texts are produced in partnership between professionals and amateurs. Operatives have obviously long recognized the authenticity and persuasive power of word-of-mouth, but the new media tools enable strategists to harness it toward electoral ends—leveraging social networks and maximizing shareable content via camera phones, blogs, and Facebook postings.

Going viral in politics is, therefore, neither definitive proof of elite power nor grassroots populism; it is, rather, a hybrid of professional and amateur practices, “exercised by those who are successfully able to create, tap, or steer information in ways that suit their goals and in ways that modify, enable, or



disable others' agency" (Chadwick, 2013, p. 207) throughout old and new media. This augments Kreiss' (2012b) conclusions that new media developments afford a hybrid form of "organizing politics that combines both management and empowerment" (p. 194) that augurs neither a dystopian future of omnipotent puppeteer operatives nor an optimistic landscape of egalitarian cocreation; rather, consultant power is shown here to be *both* proactive and reactive. The project has illuminated how "those who recognize the importance of time and the circulation of information" (Chadwick, 2013, p. 87) are attempting to wield that power, given the acceleration of the former and the abundance of the latter—two properties shown to have a reciprocally correlated relationship.

Synthesizing across the different categories of political actors explored here, a few noteworthy similarities and distinctions emerged. Most interviewees shared a sense of temporal intensification in their work, an increase in the volume of information they negotiate, and the function of social media in managing and reacting to that speed and content. Yet the compacted pace of today's news cycle felt more natural and comfortable to digital specialists than, say, advertising producers struggling to churn out spots faster or communication directors grappling with more demanding press deadlines. Additionally, although each group shared faith in the centrality of communicating politics visually, this manifests itself through different orientations. For instance, communication directors strategized stunts at and the backdrops for planned media events, while digital specialists pushed for the aforementioned conversion of written or videotaped content to spreadable infographic format.

Advertising producers, who tended to be older and more likely to have professional experience outside of politics, professed most faith in TV's enduring power, conceptualized audiences most often as politically indifferent, and most frequently fetishized the creative components of the communication process. Digital specialists were most bullish on the potential for audience microtargeting, most committed to data analytics-driven production practices (rather than "intuition"), most in favor of pushing the envelope with edgy online advertising, and regularly evoked the kind of clichés idealizing interactivity endemic to other tech-savvy marketers (e.g., "We need to speak with, not at, audiences") (Serazio, 2013b). The advertising producers and digital specialists also seemed to diverge on how much overhead should be allocated to advertising creation; perhaps unsurprisingly, the former—being *message* focused—preferred generous budgets, caring for how it "looks," and the latter—being *medium* focused—advocated cheaper, faster output, caring for where it "goes."

That divergence of opinions points to a lacuna in this data that future research might take up: the push-and-pull financial context for this professional activity. Regrettably, conversations with interviewees did not map out how funding resources are negotiated across communication tactics. Given the exponential increase in campaign financing post Citizens United, how money flows into the capacities of the operatives analyzed here (and how their effectiveness is subsequently judged by patrons) is a worthy avenue for exploration.

Finally, three caveats should be mentioned in closing: First, this research neither assumes nor implies that consultants have a definitive effect on voters. Rather, this inquiry has been into consultants' effect on the political information cycle—a vantage point less often studied. Second, this research is based upon telephone interviews rather than in-the-field ethnography; what professionals say often differs—in

idealistic ways—from what they actually do. That does not render this data necessarily invalid or inauthentic—and conversations often felt quite frank, given the protection of anonymity afforded to interviewees—but it nonetheless must be augmented and triangulated by observational accounts from future research. Finally, because this study was limited to U.S. political communication professionals—an interesting and influential, but nonetheless unique, context—its findings are not necessarily meant to be internationally generalizable to different regions at different times.

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