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Messages, Micro-targeting, and New Media Technologies

Abstract: This article argues that new media technologies are likely to elicit changes in the content, tone, and potential electoral impact of those campaign messages micro-targeted through them, with a resulting increase in the level of unaccountable, deceptive, pseudonymous campaigning. Access to data-mined information will increase the likelihood that the candidate with the larger war-chest will gain an advantage by changing the composition of the electorate. In a world of micro-targeted messaging, reporters have greater difficulty holding sponsors accountable and policing deception.

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The “analytics-based tactical optimization” that David Karpf ties to the “culture of testing” does indeed warrant his conclusion that “We are potentially moving from swing states to swing individuals, employing savvy marketing professionals to attract these persuadables and mobilize these supporters with little semblance of the slow, messy deliberative practices enshrined in our democratic theories.” What is missing from his précis of the nature and possible impact of new media technologies on politics, however, is a discussion of their effects on the content, tone, and potential electoral impact of the resulting messages. Absent as well is consideration of the role money plays in securing access to these new tactics and culture and of the ways in which imbalances in the funding of opposing campaigns can, as a result, affect election outcomes by giving one side a mobilizing and messaging edge over the other. Such advantages matter because, as Kenski, Hardy, and Jamieson (2010) confirmed in 2008, micro-targeting and imbalances in spending can shift vote preference.

Some of the results of the marriage of money and new media technology are desirable, others less so. Individualized messaging can, for example, be used to ensure that a voter receives an absentee ballot, knows where her polling place is, or is reminded to vote. Because inter-personal appeals increase the likelihood of voting (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Green and Gerber 2008), mobilizing messages can affect the proportion of the total ballots cast by supportive groups (in Obama’s case in 2008 and 2012, Hispanics and Blacks). Additionally, micro-targeting makes it possible to mobilize one’s own supporters without activating those who would cast their vote for the other side.

Importantly, the campaign with more money will have a net electoral advantage as a result. Since turnout efforts have their greatest effect with low propensity voters in high-intensity elections and high propensity voters in low intensity ones (Arceneaux and Nickerson 2009), we can also predict the groups most susceptible to mobilization efforts in this new venue. Just as targeted messages can inform a voter about civic matters, they also can be used to misdirect and deceive. One does not need to work hard to imagine how individualized messages carried through the new technologies could be used to suppress the vote in ways unlikely to be detected by election officials or vigilant reporters.

On the positive sign of the ledger, the capacity to tie tailored messaging to specific target voters can increase the amount of issue and biographically-based information that campaigns communicate. Such messages are, of course, selective. A pro-life union member in an Ohio or Michigan household will not be told that Obama is pro-choice but rather that he championed and Romney opposed the auto bailout. Nothing is new there. What is new is the ability to convey messages, both problematic and benign, without risking scrutiny and correction by reporters or scholars. Lack of critical analysis is especially problematic when such messages are pseudonymous, deceptive, un-rebutted attacks.

Because micro-targeted communication delivers “impressions” more efficiently and with less risk of backlash from unintended viewers than does mass mediated content, it is reasonable to conclude that in coming elections third party and campaign advertisers will shift more of their resources to these new technology channels. The reasons are straight forward. The mass media are an inefficient way to reach the swing voters who decide how a state will cast its electoral votes and viewer-use of remote controls and DVRs escalates the “cost per impression” of mass media advertising even further (Prior 2007).

Just as candidate messaging increasingly will appear on line so too will that by third party groups. Where these agents played only a minor role in 2008, in the 2012 presidential race they were out in force. According to Wesleyan Media Project data, in presidential primaries since 2000, “fewer than 15% of all ads were aired by outside groups.” By contrast, “[i]n 2012, this share skyrocketed to nearly 60%” (Knight Foundation 2012). From December 1, 2011 through Election Day, November 6, 2012, independent expenditure groups spent over \$360 million¹ on presidential television advertising alone.² By some estimates more than \$1 billion

¹ Excluding money spent by the Democratic National Committee (DNC) which sponsored its ads with Obama for America and the Republican National Committee (RNC), spending totaled \$361,641,510.

² Source: Kantar Media CMAG.

was spent by third-party groups in 2012, “about triple the amount in 2010” (*New York Times* 2012). This wash of dollars purchased unprecedented levels and proportions of independent expenditure advertising (Franz 2013). Since the upswing in third party content is likely to continue, this shift in placement means that the new technologies will probably carry increasing amounts of unaccountable, deceptive attack.

That prospect is problematic because representative government requires that voters be able to learn about the candidates who seek elective office. As Madison noted in his 1798 report to the General Assembly of Virginia on the Sedition Act, “The right of electing the members of the government constitutes more particularly the essence of a free and responsible government. The value and efficacy of this right depends on the knowledge of the comparative merits and demerits of the candidates for public trust, and on the equal freedom, consequently, of examining and discussing these merits of the candidates respectively” (in Elliot 2006). Indeed, in their discussions of what would become the First Amendment, the founders considered giving citizens the power to bind the votes of their representatives (see debate on August 15, 1789).

From the infamous midnight flyers or handbills that in the pre-broadcast age contained the most scurrilous attacks (Jamieson 1984, 1992), to the “Horton ads” of the broadcast era, third-party ads have increased the amount of deceptive content parlayed to the public – a tendency likely to become more pronounced now that advertisers’ messages are able to infiltrate iPods and iPads without passing through channels of mass access. In many elections past the most inaccurate and most controversial ads have been sponsored by just the kind of pseudonymous third party groups whose numbers and budgets set records in 2012. So for example, in 1988 the infamous “Willie Horton” ad by the National Security Political Action Committee harbored more deceptive statements and invited a greater number of false inferences than did the Bush campaign-sponsored “Furlough” one (see Jamieson 1992; Jamieson and Waldman 2003). In 2004, the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth ads provoked a cascade of critiques from the fact checkers unrivalled by the response to any other ads.

In 2012 both the pro-Romney and pro-Obama groups violated the expectations raised by Madison. In the primary period, the pro-Romney super PAC “Restore Our Future” led the list in both dollars spent on ads containing at least one deception and in the proportion of its ads containing at least one claim judged problematic by the fact checkers. In the post-primary period, the pro-Obama super PAC spent more on ads harboring at least one suspect allegation than did the other third-party groups. The most controversial message posted by Priorities USA implied that Romney bore responsibility for the death of a woman whose husband had been laid off by a firm owned by Bain Capital. Not to be

outdone, a pro-Romney group's web ad alleged that the Affordable Care Act taxed heart attacks, puppies, and babies. In 2012, Winneg et al. (in press) found that more than a fifth of the dollars spent by the top third party groups purchased ads containing at least one claim judged misleading by independent fact checkers. The likelihood that deceptive content will shift opinions increases when its volume is higher than that of counter-advertising, a situation more likely when content is micro targeted.

Third party advertising tends to carry a higher level of attack than candidate messaging as well. When it is fair, accurate and relevant to governance, attack is a part of healthy debate and indispensable to candidate evaluation (Jamieson 1992). Problems occur however when attack displaces the advocacy needed to give voters a reason to vote for a candidate rather than simply against an opponent and when there is too little advocacy to permit voters to learn about the promises and plans that tie campaigning to governance. Although the evidence is mixed (Goldstein and Freedman 2002), some research suggests that high levels of attack may also demobilize target groups (Ansolabehere et al. 1994; Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995).

Historically, the weaker the association between an ad and the candidate, the greater the likelihood that it will both attack and mislead. So, for example, in 1996 the level of attack in the presidential campaign ads was higher in the Democratic National Committee ads than in the Clinton-Gore ones. In 2004 the level was higher in the progressive third-party ads than in the Kerry-Edwards ones; at the same time, the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth ads contained a higher level of attack than those sponsored by the Bush-Cheney campaign. In 2008 the third-party ads by groups supporting McCain featured a higher level of attack than did those aired by his campaign itself. Consistent with that history, the Wesleyan data suggest that in 2012 “[f]ully 85% of ads sponsored by non-party organizations were purely negative, and another 10% were contrasting, leaving only 5% positive.... Party-sponsored ads, including coordinated expenditures, were also predominantly negative; 51.1% purely negative with only 11.5% positive. Candidates, although they aired more positive ads than the groups or parties, were also largely negative in their advertising” (Fowler and Ridout 2013).

When third parties mask their messengers behind nondescript names such as Priorities USA or Americans for Prosperity, they make it impossible for audiences and more difficult for reporters to factor the source into assessment of the message. Because sources with low ethos are by all accounts less persuasive than those that have earned wide respect, the masking process forestalls inferences that undercut the persuasiveness of messages (Andersen and Clevenger 1963; Berlo, Lemert, and Mertz 1969). Misdirecting self-identifications also thwart the ability of low information voters to draw generally reliable inferences about the

self-interest of sponsoring groups (Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991; Popkin 1994; Lupia and McCubbins 1998).

Where ads carried in broadcast or cable channels can now be tracked by groups such as Kantar-CMAG, no comparable process exists to enable reporters and scholars to reliably intercept narrowcast information on the internet. As a result we do not know the characteristics of the targeted messages that the Interactive Advertising Bureau reported accounted for between \$130 million and \$200 million in ad spending during the 2012 presidential election (Tsukayama 2013). When reporters are able to locate ads, they can both hold them accountable for deception and, in the case of pseudonymously sponsored ones, try to unmask the funder. So, for example, during the prescription drug benefit debate, news accounts revealed that “United Seniors Association” was backed by the pharmaceutical industry and, in 2012, Americans for Prosperity, funded in part at least by the Koch brothers. Voters who are aware of the identity of the funder can then add to their evaluation of the message such press-provided information as the fact that one of the Koch companies merited a large civil penalty “for its role in more than thirty oil spills in 2000” (Mayer 2013).

Where does all of this leave us? Contrary to *The New Yorker* cartoon in which no one on the internet knows you are a dog, in the politics of 2016 – in which randomized A/B testing enables advertisers, in Karpf’s words, “to optimize every element” of an “online communication strategy” – messengers reaching out to swing voters will not only know that you are not a dog but also that you are a size 10, 36 year old white married pro-choice female mother of three children under 18 who is a vegetarian, reads the *New York Times*, shops at Costco, reliably votes, drives a Prius, watches *Good Wife* and CBS News and has clicked on an internet ad of their campaign’s at least once. If that voter receives internet messages proclaiming that the Republican in the race opposes stem cell research, and that information is inaccurate, how will she know? When such a scenario played out in 2008 in micro-targeted radio, the fact-checkers spotted and debunked the false attack on John McCain. Had the same misinformation reached our hypothetical swing voter in 2008 only over the web, those reporters may well not have known that it existed.

Implications for Future Research

The lessons of elections past teach that campaign messages made memorable by third-party money can increase the level of un-rebutted deceptive attack while at the same time diminishing both the audience’s capacity to factor a message’s source into its assessment of message and the press’s capacity to unmask decep-

tion and reveal sponsors' self-interests. In the process these often pseudonymous messages can, to take a few liberties with Madison's words, alter "the essence of a free and responsible government" by circumscribing the citizenry's "knowledge of the comparative merits and demerits of the candidates for public trust" and its ability to examine and discuss the merits of the candidates.

In a world of micro-targeted messaging, it is difficult for reporters and scholars to know who is saying what to whom, where and with what effect. In the absence of such information, journalists' ability to hold sources accountable is even more circumscribed than when pseudonymous groups broadcast their messages in places open to public view. And without knowing what is being whispered to whom, scholars have no good way to determine what effects, if any, this new form of campaigning is having on the candidates, the voters and the process writ large. If they are to subject micro-targeted campaign messages to their own "culture[s] of testing," as they should, scholars and reporters need to achieve their own "analytics-based tactical optimization." Doing so in both communities should be a priority.

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