

**Institutional Contexts of Use of New Media in Electoral Politics:
From Howard Dean to Barack Obama
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Abstract

While many scholars of online politics focus on the falling costs of information as enabling new forms of collective action, this paper argues that digital electoral practices are the product of the sociotechnical work of a network of individuals and organizations that give them a particular shape and form. Through open-ended interviews and participant observation I follow a network of actors that convened on the 2003-2004 Howard Dean campaign for Democratic presidential nomination and subsequently founded and joined many organizational sites in the political field, culminating in Barack Obama's 2007-2008 presidential run. I show how these figures carried a host of digital artifacts and practices honed on the Dean effort to other electoral and advocacy campaigns. In contrast to many accounts that celebrate seemingly leveled, collaborative participation, contemporary Democratic electoral practices are premised on sophisticated data gathering and the convening and leveraging of peer networks for institutionalized campaign ends. I demonstrate how these sociotechnical practices create new electoral collectives that extend the agency of citizens in some domains while foreclosing more substantive forms of participation.

After a bleak January 2004 Howard Dean's campaign staff had little left in the nomination calendar to look forward to. Joe Trippi, the campaign's guru, resigned as Campaign Manager following Dean's lackluster showings in Iowa and New Hampshire. The mood at headquarters in Burlington, Vermont was one of disbelief, sadness, and exhaustion. Some staffers just drifted away, heading back home to make up for missed classes and neglected families. Others took up last stands against John Kerry in states like Michigan and Wisconsin. And yet, even as comments on *Blog for America* tapered off and fundraising fell to a trickle, the phones of the staffers that developed Dean's online campaign were ringing. Michael Silberman (personal communication, July 28, 2008), Dean's National Meetup Director, recalls that in the midst of a wreck of a campaign the future was unexpectedly bright as everyone in the political world wanted the Dean "magic": "We all received calls from people trying to poach us....We were all pretty well marketable at that time, probably moreso than we knew."

In the months after the campaign ended Dean's new media staffers capitalized on these phone calls. Despite the fact that Dean only won a single primary in his home state of Vermont the campaign's association with cutting-edge technological innovation ensured these staffers were in high demand. It seemed like every Democratic political candidate and advocacy organization was looking for help navigating the bold new world of "open source politics." Dean staffers, many of whom began their political careers during the 2003-2004 primary and presidential campaigns after previous professional work in the commercial technology sector, quickly recognized and took advantage of these opportunities. They founded and joined an extraordinary array of digital consulting firms, prominent progressive blogs, think tanks, and organizations that were training the next generation of online activists. They wrote books and articles about their experiences on the campaign, became regulars on the Internet politics

conference circuit, and served as important interpreters of online politics for professional journalists in subsequent electoral cycles.

In the course of their work these individuals carried a set of digital tools and campaign practices honed on the Dean campaign (Kreiss, 2009) across the political field, culminating in Barack Obama's presidential campaign. The firms they founded are now among the most prominent in Democratic campaigning and were built around a particular assemblage of digital artifacts and organizational practices. Social networking platforms, integrated campaign databases, and communications tools like email and blogs support techniques of digital surveillance, marketing, and the convening and leveraging of peer social networks for the institutionalized electoral tasks of fundraising, voter identification, and mobilization. Taken together, these artifacts and practices enable campaigns to centralize political power through the constitution of immense sociotechnical systems that direct the work of supporters far beyond formal organizational boundaries, while also extending the agency of citizens to participate in institutionalized ways.

The work of these political intermediaries rarely appears in paradigmatic accounts of new media and politics. Obama's campaign was celebrated in many popular and scholarly quarters as uniquely participatory and democratic. This assessment echoes five-year's worth of scholarly work on the political applications of the social technologies grouped under the banner of 'Web 2.0'. Despite ethnographic findings that demonstrate the centrality of professional campaign consultants and political data to online campaigns (Howard, 2006), the social labor that constitutes modern campaigning is eclipsed by theoretical accounts of the falling information costs that are presumed to be driving shifts in electoral campaigns towards more collaborative, leveled, and "bottom-up" forms of civic participation. This literature proceeds from and reworks

well-established theories of collective action (Olson, 1965; Tarrow, 1998) in positing that networked communications technologies fundamentally reshape the problem of “free riding” and the necessity of formal organization. For example, Bimber, Flanagin, and Stohl (2005, p. 366) argue that “self-organizing” increasingly defines collective action in a world with drastically falling information costs and routine “public private boundary spanning.” Meanwhile, cultural theorists argue that citizens are newly active and empowered to take politics into their own hands, undermining the power of elites (Jenkins, 2006). For Jenkins (2008), the Obama campaign, like the Dean campaign before it, is a powerful example of the extent to which digital networks are reworking fundamental relationships between citizens, candidates, and the state.

This paper takes a decidedly different view of networked political campaigning. I advance two primary analytical claims by simultaneously detailing the social work, political practices, and technical artifacts of a group of former Dean staffers. First, I demonstrate that social and financial networks underpin contemporary digital campaigning by chronicling the migration of these Dean figures to a number of sites in electoral politics on the basis of professional ties. Second, I argue that the sociotechnical work of these individuals in a host of organizational intermediaries shapes the distinct forms of contemporary digital citizenship. I show how this work encompasses techniques of ‘digitally selling the president’ through psychology, intimacy, and sociality and the creation of electoral human-machine systems that realize new forms of political collectivity. These collectives and the structured interactivity they are premised upon extends citizen agency in institutionalized domains while offering little in the way of substantive participation in electoral politics. I do this analytical work by following a group of Dean alumni from the end of the 2003-2004 primaries to the 2007-2008 presidential campaign.

This paper proceeds in three parts. First, I provide an overview of the sites Dean staffers and other figures that emerged during the 2003-2004 electoral cycle founded and circulated through in the years after the campaign. I then detail the history of one influential digital political consulting firm, Blue State Digital (BSD), to show how social and financial networks provided a host of consulting opportunities and enabled BSD to carry campaign practices and technical artifacts implemented during the Dean effort to other sites. Finally, I focus on the firm's work for the Obama campaign to show how networked tools are incorporated into electoral politics as part of sociotechnical assemblages premised on data and leveraging networked social relationships. Evidence for this paper is drawn from my larger dissertation research project. Over the course of the last two years I conducted open-ended interviews with over thirty political consultants active across three presidential campaign cycles: 1999-2000, 2003-2004, and 2007-2008. This includes ten members of Dean's national campaign staff, of which five were in the Internet Division. I also extensively used the Obama campaign's suite of social networking tools as a participant observer during the 2007-2008 primary and general elections.

Inventing the Progressive Industry

The reelection of George Bush and a host of electoral losses in 2003-2004 sent the Democratic Party into deep disarray. In the vacuum of Party leadership soon after the election a group of donors and bloggers emerged to bankroll and create a new progressive infrastructure modeled after the Goldwater conservative movement of the 1970s (Bai, 2007). These progressive activists shared a deep disillusionment with Party insiders, politicians, and, especially for the online contingent, the professionalized political consultant culture in Washington D.C. They argued that the Democratic establishment produced a narrow electoral map, an over-reliance on

an elite group of millionaires for funding, and centrist, poll-tested policy positions. What they needed, these activists believed, were the advocacy organizations, think tanks, media institutes, and organizing groups that made the Republican Party so successful over the course of three decades.

A host of figures that played starring roles during the 2003-2004 electoral cycle, especially in the online campaigns of Democratic candidates, were especially prominent in these efforts to remake the Democratic Party. These individuals leveraged the extraordinary cultural validation of their technical projects and a host of social and professional ties to become, within a few short years, the new elite of online Democratic politics and influential Party insiders in their own right. I refer to these individuals as “venture progressives” to distinguish them from the “e-politics” professionals (Howard, 2006) that were the primary providers of digital campaign services prior to 2003-2004. The venture progressives generally share a number of characteristics, including professional backgrounds in the commercial technology industry and explicit partisanship, and were especially active in Dean’s campaign and the effort to draft retired general Wesley Clark into the nomination race. Together, they are an elite marked by the visibility and position they hold within digital networks and the cultural, social, and economic resources they can muster to convene, facilitate, and shape collaborative modes of electoral action. They achieved this not only through the celebration of their new media work during the 2003-2004 campaigns, but the ways this enables them to powerfully blur the roles of consultant, blogger, party operative, activist, democratic reformer, and online politics expert in their work, and in ways that are rarely clear. In sum, the 2003-2004 election provided social, cultural, and financial resources for a particular set of individuals that empowers them to play leading roles in organizing networked communication and digital social action.

For example, the visibility of blogs during the 2003-2004 election and the social networks formed on sites external to the Dean campaign in support of the candidate during the

early days of the primary proved enormously influential in launching a number of political careers. Jerome Armstrong and Markos Moulitsas Zuniga, bloggers turned Dean consultants who played leading roles in early blog efforts in support of the candidate, were at the center of this. Their informal and formal work for the campaign, along with the public visibility they enjoyed through the professional press, helped solidify their roles in the emerging progressive blogosphere, most notably in the growth of the audience for their blogs, both of which launched in 2002. In addition, a number of now-prominent progressive bloggers convened around the unofficial “Howard Dean 2004” (later renamed “Dean Nation”) blog and Armstrong’s MyDD.com (My Direct Democracy). Armstrong (2007, p. 44), who during this period served as a mentor to many others earning him the nickname of “The Blogfather” (Scherer, 2006), argues that the unofficial Dean Nation blog served as a “farm team” for a host of prominent progressives. Joe Rospars, for instance, was invited to contribute to Howard Dean 2004, which in turn facilitated his getting hired by the Dean campaign as a writer for the Internet Division. Rospars later became a co-founder of Blue State Digital and the New Media Director for Obama’s presidential run. Ezra Klein, now an associate editor for *The American Prospect*, and Matthew Yglesias, currently a fellow and blogger at the Center for American Progress, a prominent progressive think tank, also blogged at Dean Nation.

For Armstrong, Moulitsas, and other prominent bloggers this visibility transformed their blogs into an organizational infrastructure that politically and financially supported their efforts to remake the Democratic Party, enabling them to run primary candidates against officials who bucked progressive positions and contest areas of the country that the Party ignored. After the 2003-2004 election, for instance, online progressive activists founded ActBlue, a political action committee that serves as a clearing-house for online donations. Driving these donations are the

efforts of a network of blogs including DailyKos and MyDD that promote favored candidates. Through the 2008 general election citizens channeled nearly \$90 million through ActBlue for Democratic candidates, making it “the nation’s largest source of funds for Democrats” (ActBlue, 2009). This includes a number of high profile campaigns in the years after the 2003-2004 cycle that demonstrated the influence of these bloggers for the political press and Party establishment. In a 2005 special election for a house seat in Ohio progressive blogs raised over \$500,000 for Democratic candidate Paul Hackett (Schneider, 2005). Seeking to capitalize on this, the principals behind a group of blogs including DailyKos, MyDD, the Swing State Project, and Open Left launched the “Blue Majority” campaign, where they endorsed candidates by consensus and fundraised to “strengthen and support our new Democratic majorities” (DavidNYC, 2006). This resulted in \$1.54 million in fundraising in 2006 directed towards several successful candidates including Senators John Tester and Jim Webb (Kos, 2006).

These were not simply the independent efforts of prominent bloggers. Their activities were informally and formally coordinated with a wider group of progressive, Democratic activists that emerged on the various campaigns of the 2003-2004 election cycle and subsequently pursued professional political work. For example, former Dean staffers founded the New Organizing Institute, a progressive organization providing training in on-line organizing tactics, and joined think tanks like the New Politics Institute, which researches new techniques of digital political campaigning. After the 2004 general election, meanwhile, Matthew Stoller founded a Sunday meeting for young progressives at the D.C. bar The Townhouse. Stoller was active in the DraftClark campaign and would later become an editor at MyDD, co-founder of the blog OpenLeft, a political consultant for Ned Lamont’s senate campaign, and the president of BlogPac, an organization that supports progressive political activists. What was initially a bar gathering grew into an invitation only e-mail list maintained by Stoller that serves as a forum for

these bloggers, digital consultants, activists, and political leaders to network, share and generate progressive ideas, find out about professional opportunities, and plan strategy. In the words of Matthew Gross, Dean's Director of Internet Communications who later advised John Edwards's 2007-2008 bid, Townhouse is "a very conscious effort to build a power structure...These are people who are not just blogging, but who are thinking very sophisticatedly about what the Republicans did for 20 years to get to the point of being able to dominate the cultural discourse" (Schulman, 2007). Yet the elite, invitation-only Townhouse listserv proved controversial given prevalent rhetorical claims for an open source political movement. When a message that Moulitsas Zuniga posted on the listerv circulated widely in violation of the rules, it made the existence of the list public and the incident was widely debated among the broader progressive netroots and written about by professional journalists (Koppleman, 2006).

Also on the Townhouse listserv were the principals of a number of digital political consultancies founded in the wake of the 2003-2004 elections. Many of these individuals became involved in politics for the first time on the Dean campaign and in the effort to draft Wesley Clark after having previous careers in the commercial technology sector. A political climate that heightened partisanship and motivated people to get involved, along with the post-September 11th economic slowdown in the technology and communications industries, facilitated their initial crossover into politics (Franke-Ruta, 2003). Not only were campaigns and advocacy organizations looking for the tools and online organizing skills of these digital consultants after the 2003-2004 elections, given their professional backgrounds and work on these campaigns they saw a wide-open market. As Adam Mordecai (personal communication, January 23, 2009), an Iowa staffer for Dean and co-founder of the consulting firm Advomatic, describes it, his colleagues quickly realized during the campaign that a few firms that put out inferior products dominated the online political space, and they grasped commercially that "they needed to be in this field."

These consultancies, in turn, quickly became among the most prominent in online Democratic campaigning. Referring to his colleagues' professional efforts, Nicco Mele (personal communication, July 27, 2008), Dean's Webmaster and co-founder of the consulting firm EchoDitto, argued that by the end of Dean's run "it felt like there was a lot of opportunity, it felt like we invented an industry." In many respects they did, which is apparent in the changes in the market for digital campaign services. At the start of the 2003-2004 cycle a few nonpartisan firms including Convio and Kintera, hired by the Dean and Clark campaigns respectively, dominated the industry and provided campaigns and nonprofit and advocacy organizations with a host of Website design, customer relations management, data, and e-mail services. To provide a provisional sketch of these changes, Table 1 uses Federal Election Commission (FEC) data to present the major digital consulting firms in Democratic electoral politics during the 2007-2008 cycle. I include the campaign associations of the founders of these firms where appropriate and the date they were founded when available.

Table 1: Candidate, PAC, Party, and 527 Disbursements to Digital Consulting Firms 2007-2008*

Firm	Total Received	Major Clients	Assoc. of Founders
Blue State Digital (founded 2004)	\$7,997,056	Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee; Democratic National Committee; Obama for America; Richardson for President	Dean
Trippi and Associates	\$2,730,247**	John Edwards for President	Dean
Mayfield Strategy Group	\$2,097,737	Hillary Clinton for President; Sen. Hillary Clinton; Sen. Bill Nelson	Kerry
Plus Three (founded 2001)	\$773,303	John Edwards for President; Emily's List; Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee	Democratic National Committee (2002); Kerry
Blackrock Associates (founded 2004)	\$424,090	Senator Barbara Boxer; Nick Lampson for Congress; Sen. Jim Webb	DraftClark2004
Kintera (founded 1999)	\$354,408	Republican Party of Florida; Ohio Democratic Party; Michigan Republican Party***	
Convio (founded 1999)	\$258,828	Emily's List; Stop Her Now; Republican Party of Texas***	
Wired for Change (founded as Democracy in Action, 2004)	\$243,047	ActBlue; BlogPac; Chris Dodd for President; Green Party of the United States; MoveOn.org Political Action; Matthew 25 Network	
Grassroots Enterprise (founded 1999)	\$191,325	Christie Todd Whitman; Progressive Majority***	DraftWesleyClark****
WebStrong	\$185,052	21 st Century Democrats	Dean (Jerome Armstrong)
Eric Carbone	\$102,531	Biden for President	DraftWesleyClark.com; Clark campaign
EchoDitto (founded 2004)	\$85,208	The Fund for America; Jstreet PAC; America Votes	Dean
Matthew Gross Communications (founded 2004)	\$83,750	John Edwards for President	DraftClark2004
Blue Utopia (founded 2004)	\$58,929	Ohio Democratic Party; Alaska Democratic Party; Washington State Democratic Central Committee	

Lowell Feld	\$24,540	Congressional candidates	DraftWesleyClark
Advomatic (founded 2004)	\$19,897	John Edwards for President; WesPAC; Gravel for President; Blue America PAC; Alaska Democratic Party	Dean

Source: Congressional Quarterly MoneyLine.

* Chart provides an estimated snapshot of the revenue of major digital consulting firms in Democratic electoral politics given that comparisons between these companies are extremely difficult to draw on the basis of existing FEC data. One challenge is the lack of standardization in reporting requirements. For example, disbursements by campaigns are variously categorized (“Internet Services” and “Web Services” denotes just two ways campaigns list payouts) and a wide range of activities fall under each of these rubrics, including: online strategy, design, hosting, analytics, blogging, databases, and customer relations management. Revenues are also determined by clients that win the primaries. For these reasons, this chart should serve to simply highlight some of the prominent firms in electoral politics instead of a fully accurate accounting of revenues or even ranking. Chart also does not include 501c(3) or c(4) social service and advocacy organizations, which are not required to report disbursements yet constitute a significant portion of revenue for most of these companies.

** Includes television advertisements

*** Kintera, Convio, and Grassroots Enterprises, relatively older firms in the field, provide services to both Democrats and Republicans.

****There were a host of independent efforts to draft Wesley Clark into the race.

As is clear, firms founded by venture progressives handled the online components for some of the most prominent Democratic campaigns of the 2007-2008 electoral cycle. While this table documents the changing providers of digital consulting services, these firms also ushered in a qualitatively new style of online Democratic political campaigning honed during 2003-2004 that combines the technoculture and entrepreneurialism of Silicon Valley, ideological fervor of partisan politics, and rigorous focus on electoral victory of political consultants. The next section traces the work of Blue State Digital, the most prominent firm to emerge from the 2003-2004 electoral cycle, with an eye toward providing a window onto the new organizational sites and practices of online Democratic campaigning. In the process I demonstrate how ‘Web 2.0’ electoral practices are not the result of changing information environments, but the product of the sociotechnical work of a network of individuals and organizations that give them a particular shape and form.

“Design. Technology. Strategy.” for the Progressive Movement

Dean’s new media staffers were awakening to the professional opportunities in electoral politics just as it was becoming clear that John Kerry would be the Democratic Party’s nominee in the general election. This was especially true for the four founders of the digital political consulting firm Blue State Digital who approached electoral politics like a start-up, one that would uniquely blend their commitment to progressive politics, technical expertise, and entrepreneurial acumen. As co-founder Jascha Franklin Hodge (personal communication, December 22, 2008), the Dean campaign’s National Systems Administrator, describes the founding of BSD:

We had recognized very early on, myself and the founders, that there was a lot of opportunity in this space.... Myself, Joe [Rospars], Clay [Johnson], and Ben Self. And everyone except Joe had come out of a high tech business environment. Clay

and I had both worked either for venture firms or a number of venture-backed companies. All of us recognized that there was a business need that was going on. And all of us recognized in a very intuitive way that the process by which the Dean campaign came to its technology innovation was less than optimal from a technical standpoint and from a best practices standpoint.

Roy Neel, a veteran political consultant with ties to both Clinton and Gore who took over as Dean's campaign manager after Trippi's demotion and subsequent departure (Cillizza, 2004), joined this founding team as one of the earliest hires. Well-versed in the political culture of Washington D.C. and with the social ties necessary to broker consulting contracts, Neel helped the fledgling company appeal to more established political organizations, not just the more experimental insurgent candidates and smaller advocacy organizations.

BSD's founders started out with a significant asset in the actual online tools used by the Dean campaign. After dropping out of the race for the nomination Dean launched Democracy for America (DFA), a 501(c)3 non-profit organization intended to serve as a mobilization vehicle for his supporters should he decide to run for president again in 2007-2008. As a co-founder of BSD Rospars served as a consultant for DFA tasked with rebuilding the Dean e-mail list (Chris Warshaw, personal communication, November 26, 2008). On the strength of the founders' ties with Dean and Tom McMahon, the Deputy Campaign Manager who became the Executive Director of DFA, the fledgling firm was hired to build a more sophisticated set of online tools for DFA. To do so, DFA granted BSD the intellectual property rights in the on-line tools developed and used by the Dean campaign. While BSD co-founder Clay Johnson built most of these tools, many former staffers cited how some were created and improved upon by other staff and volunteers. The terms of this contract with DFA subsequently became the BSD business model. Unlike many other digital political consulting firms, clients lease a suite of BSD's networked tools. This means that any improvements or modifications in the software paid for by the client or even developed by volunteers are BSD's property.

Social and professional ties forged through the Dean campaign in turn gained the firm its early clients and paved the way for its ultimate prominence in the field. In the process, under the leasing model BSD gradually rebuilt, integrated, and packaged the Dean tools as a sophisticated, complete suite of political applications. BSD's first major project was building the online applications for Progress Now, a multi-state progressive advocacy organization founded by Dean's Web Strategist, Bobby Clark. This work resulted in the basic infrastructure of what became the Democratic National Committee's (DNC) "PartyBuilder" tool (Hodge, personal communication, December 22, 2008), developed during Dean's tenure as Party Chair, a position he achieved in February of 2005 in part given the work of online activists. Launched in the fall of 2006, PartyBuilder is an advanced social-networking suite that allows individuals to blog, host events, and fundraise for the Party. To facilitate the development and implementation of this platform, Dean alumni and BSD co-founder Ben Self served as the Technology Director for the DNC while working for the firm.

Extending many of the technical practices of the Dean campaign, PartyBuilder enables citizens to create digital social relationships that are then leveraged for the ends of the Party. For example, users can set up online profiles, individual fundraising pages, and affinity groups. They can also manage off-line events, engage in online petition and letter-writing campaigns, and blog. Underneath these interactive features are data systems that enable supporters to find each other and engage in electoral activities based on geographic political representation. While PartyBuilder was a conscious attempt to build a more sophisticated version of the tools used successfully by the Dean campaign, in 2006 it was by no means clear that it was going to be successful for political organizing.

This assessment changed dramatically as PartyBuilder became the kernel for the social networking suite that fueled Obama's run for the presidency. Jim Brayton, a multimedia staffer for Dean, former Chief Technology Officer for EchoDitto – a digital consulting firm also launched by Dean alumni – and Internet Director at Obama's Hopefund PAC and later, Obama for America, brought BSD to the Obama campaign. BSD adapted the PartyBuilder package for the campaign and Joe Rospars subsequently became Obama's New Media Director. This resulted in the development and deployment of MyBarackObama.com (MyBO), the online platform for the campaign that featured much of what PartyBuilder offered, including a campaign blog, detailed supporter profiles, personalized fundraising pages, applications to manage affinity groups, and event-planning tools. Unlike the DNC's PartyBuilder, citizens used MyBO to an unprecedented extent, dwarfing not only the 2003-2004 electoral campaigns but the online presences of Obama's rivals in the primary and general elections. By the end of the campaign there were thirteen million people on Obama's e-mail list, two million active users of MyBO, and 35,000 affinity groups for Obama (Ambinder, 2008).

Technical Innovation and Electoral Institutions on the Obama Campaign

The integration of the online tools developed during earlier electoral cycles onto one platform in order to synchronize the data they generated and, at key points, combine it with national voter databases was the crucial innovation of MyBO. MyBO.com generated three primary types of data. The first involved tracking how supporters used the MyBO applications. The second was capturing the results of volunteers' canvasses of voters performed through an online "neighbor to neighbor" tool, an application similar to one developed for the Kerry campaign that allowed volunteers to contact supporters. Finally, the campaign pulled in user data

from external sites including Facebook. Meanwhile, the campaign combined this data with two national voter databases culled from public and commercial sources and developed in the wake of the 2003-2004 election cycle. Catalist, a private firm founded by prominent Democratic political consultants that has information on more than 280 million Americans, owns one of these databases. The DNC built the second, and hired the firm Voter Activation Network to develop VoteBuilder, an advanced interface launched in 2007 for field organizers to use in canvassing, event organizing, and volunteer management. The DNC licensed this technology to state parties and the 2007-2008 primary campaigns, which ensured that one central national voter database owned by the Party was continuously updated. The Obama campaign then relied on the firm Strategic Telemetry to analyze the data and generate likely voter, supporter, and persuasion models, in addition to having its own in-house analytic team responsible for analyzing e-mail and MyBO user data (Will Bunnett, personal communication, April 9, 2009).

As Sterne (2003, p. 92) demonstrates, technologies emerge from techniques. Institutions of competitive electoral campaigning shaped the development and affordances of platforms like PartyBuilder and MyBO. Both encode and “amplify” (Agre, 2002) data and targeted communication practices that are over forty years old and have their origins in the development of modern political consulting (Blumenthal, 1980; Sabato, 1981; Johnson, 2007), changes in the nomination process (Polsby, 1983), and the incorporation of digital computers into electoral politics (Howard, 2006). While they receive little attention in the scholarly literature on new media and political campaigns and in popular press accounts of the 2007-2008 election, these data practices drive much contemporary campaigning and are central components of the services offered by firms like BSD. For example, as early as 2004 BSD offered digital tracking features

that supported the logging of detailed supporter profiles and the narrowcasting of political communication:

For every constituent in your list, our constituent viewer allows you to see an individual's contributions, email actions (opens, click-throughs, and forwards), signup information, initiations sent to friends, petitions signed, and every other action they have taken through your site. With this picture you can target emails to individuals or groups who meet particular profiles (for example, likely repeat donors or avid email forwarders) (Blue State Digital, 2004).

These data collection and analytic practices update the "selling of the president" for the Information Age. McGinnis's (1988) classic work describes how candidates hired advertising agencies to sell them to the electorate in the era of broadcast television. Today, digital political consulting firms follow their commercial counterparts in online marketing and advertising. Consultants narrowcast political communication based on intimate portraits of citizens gleaned through commercial, public, and generated data. This narrowcasting takes many forms. Political advertisements are delivered online based on cookies that track browsing habits or relational data collected on sites like Facebook. Emails are segmented according to the demographic information citizens give to campaigns, the actions they take as a result of them, and other involvement on campaign platforms. Indeed, while a recent body of scholarship calls for updating models of political communication given that citizens now "self-select" among media outlets (Bennett and Iyengar, 2008), this overlooks the ways citizens are selected as the recipients of political communication based on their "data shadows" (Howard, 2006).

Even further, through their deployment of new media platforms firms like BSD structure and harness precisely those social production practices that many herald as democratizing political information and culture (Benkler, 2006; Jenkins, 2006). MyBO affords citizens the opportunity to create digital social networks of relatives, neighbors, and friends, all the while making them visible to the campaign in the form of data. These networks in turn become the

conduits of the campaign's political messages, whether they are responses to the charges of rivals or fundraising solicitations. In this digital "two-step flow" of political communication, campaigns maximize the reach of messages through capitalizing on social intimacy, as citizens urge their network ties to support the candidate. In short, citizens are turned into political advertisers for their family, neighbors, and friends. This extended to the external social networking sites that the campaign utilized. For example, the New Media Division of the Obama campaign had staff under the direction of Chris Hughes, the co-founder of Facebook, devoted to managing the candidate's presence on sites including Facebook, MySpace, and YouTube. The campaign used Facebook Connect – an application that allows users to synchronize data between Facebook and external sites – to enable supporters to publicize their activities on MyBO to their wider social networks. It also allowed the campaign to directly leverage these external social networks. For instance, Facebook Connect users could see a list of their friends in battleground states and easily contact them with voting reminders (Sternberg, 2008).

Figure One: Obama Facebook Application*

Obama Home | Get Involved | The Talk | Make Calls

Add to Profile | Invite Your Friends

I VOTED!
(NOW WHAT?)

VOTE FOR
CHANGE

Find out where to vote
Let us know where you live, and we will give you details on where, when and how to vote.

Your Street Address

City

Select your State | Zip

Email Address

GET STARTED

Ask your friends
to vote early.

Virginia is one of the most important states for Barack to win. Make sure your friend RYANNE votes early. It's easy, convenient, and helps the campaign!

Send a message

Remin

Contacted

Next Friend

> View the entire list

Share

*Reprinted from Sternberg (2008)

The consequence of these practices is that citizens are not the primary agents of their communicative participation. The targeting of political communication and translation of social relationships into message channels define narrow forms of engagement. This runs counter to the pervasive claims made for a leveled “networked public sphere” (Benkler, 2006) and “participatory culture” (Jenkins, 2006) engendered by digitally networked social production. It also challenges empirical research that digital media will compel communication theory to move “from what issues the media tell people to think about to what issues people tell the media they want to think about” (Chaffee and Metzger, 2001, p. 375). These theories fail to account for the ways citizens are selected as the targets of political communication and do not consider how

interactivity is structured. For example, the Obama campaign used emails as one-way forms of communication. Recipients could reply but would very rarely receive an answer from the campaign. More generally, there were few avenues to contact an Obama staffer and no institutionalized forums for debating substantive matters of policy that the campaign took account of. The ‘Get FISA Right’ protest on MyBO demonstrates this. Activists created the MyBO group in the summer of 2008 to protest Obama’s general election support of retroactive immunity for the telecommunications firms that assisted the Bush administration in its warrantless wiretapping program. Through professional media attention and a supporting network of blogs and Facebook groups it grew to over 15,000 members, making it the most popular group on MyBO. However, despite the fact that the group raised enough funds to produce a YouTube video and a national cable television advertisement, Obama did not change his position on the bill. Instead, he addressed the group through a written statement explaining his position. The striking limits to interactivity are clear and suggest that while citizens have unprecedented opportunities to share information with their peers, they are still largely the consumers of campaign content. Indeed, they consume in new, highly social ways.

The use of new media platforms for the communicative practices of contemporary campaigning is only one aspect of online politics. Tools like MyBO are also used by campaigns to produce institutionalized forms of online social action. Digital media help fashion supporters into active field agents and fundraisers for the campaign. This occurs, in part, through sociotechnical practices that structure participation in defined directions, means of “control” where “actions are not predetermined...yet the routes are navigated” (Guins, 2009, p. 7). Central to this is providing the sense of interactive freedom while delimiting the choices citizens have for their civic participation. For example, the campaign had a set of instrumental, rationalized goals for the MyBO platform oriented around recruiting volunteers, registering voters, canvassing, and

raising money. As with the applications of the Dean campaign, this is clear in the designed affordances of platforms like MyBO that actively promote and support some actions (fundraising) while precluding others (contacting the candidate's policy advisors.) Beyond these affordances, the design of the interface was the result of experimental psychological data on usage of the site (Siroker, May 8, 2009). The analytics team within the New Media Division of the campaign, many staffers of which were engineers and analysts with extensive commercial experience, continuously performed multivariate statistical tests to find the optimal design of MyBO that produced certain unconscious actions by citizens. This included the shape of the buttons for action items, text of appeals to donate and sign-up for the email list, and the media that first-time, repeat, and active users encountered on the site. The goal was to maximize the "net value of persons" for the campaign by eliciting certain volunteer and fundraising actions with every hit on the site (ibid.)

These forms of structured interactivity incorporated citizens into a vast sociotechnical system that realized and leveraged networked social and symbolic action for the campaign's ends. In their engagement with MyBO citizens became part of a distributed collaborative enterprise that was largely outside of the boundaries of the formal campaign organization, yet coordinated and shaped by the tools it deployed and its communicative work. While many theorists argue that networked politics is radically decentralized, the Obama campaign's headquarters became the key site for the aggregation and analysis of data and the design and coordination work that structured this collaboration. In this sense, these campaign practices are sociotechnical techniques that facilitate what Mumford (1966, p. 192) referred to as "action at a distance" (*see also* Latour, 1987). In other words, deploying artifacts at local sites enroll citizens in networks (Barry, Osborne, and Rose 1996, p. 12) that have the power of the campaign

organization as their effect. For example, the campaign's new media staffers monitored the traces of social relations made visible in the form of the data that is constantly generated every time citizens click through and pass along e-mails, host events, and raise money. The work of these staffers in turn is premised on what they glean from this data as they continually strive to replicate successful appeals, maintain communication to keep supporters engaged, and increase engagement to meet volunteer recruitment and fundraising goals. As important were the online field operations of the campaign distributed at sites around the country yet centralized through the new media applications and data practices of the formal organization. MyBO connected citizens to the institutions of the competitive electoral field as the campaign organization integrated and directed the field efforts of thousands of online and on-the-ground volunteers across enormous spatial distances.

To illustrate these processes, the campaign utilized MyBO to create a national field operation. BSD's online "neighbor to neighbor" tool, first developed for PartyBuilder, enabled Obama supporters across the country to make unsolicited phone calls on behalf of the candidate from the convenience of their own home. In prior elections, campaigns set up satellite offices across the country and provided volunteers with printouts of voters to call and record their preferences. This data was later transferred into a computer database by other volunteers. "Neighbor to neighbor" extended these practices, providing an interface that was synched with national databases. This enabled the campaign to provide volunteers with a targeted list of geographically proximate, demographically unique, or swing state voters. In using this tool, volunteers had access to basic demographic information on members of their neighbors' household along with data on their party affiliation, registration status, and results of prior canvasses. The campaign also provided volunteers with a script and an online data entry system that enabled them to instantly record voter responses. The results of these calls, more than nine

million over the course of the campaign, were then available to field organizers working on the ground (Hodge, personal communication, December 22, 2008). It is estimated that voters revealed over 223 million pieces of data about themselves to callers and canvassers during the course of the campaign, including their stance on issues and intended vote choice. Meanwhile, the platform logged supporter activity in databases and the campaign targeted active volunteers for further solicitation.

As such, these are less the open, transparent, participatory, and collaborative democratic forms claimed by many theorists of new media and politics than a vast, distributed system coordinated by the sociotechnical practices of a formal campaign organization. While lacking the formal roles and rules of bureaucratic organizations in their management of volunteers, the Obama campaign achieved an unprecedented degree of integration in a national presidential campaign. These practices powerfully blend top-down, professional management (Skocpol, 2003) with horizontal forms of collaboration, both of which are supported by technical platforms that facilitate centralized coordination and monitoring along with horizontal social interaction. Open source guru Tim O'Reilly notes this explicitly in his perceptive description of the campaign's "Houdini Project," a real-time system of monitoring when voters went to the polls so they would be immediately removed from "get out the vote" lists and the campaign's efforts directed elsewhere. In language that recalls Mumford's (1966) classic work on the "megamachine," O'Reilly (2008) argues that we should "Consider MyBarackObama.com as a kind of vast machine, with humans as extensions of the programmatic brain...."

The campaign also deployed a host of social-psychological mechanisms to motivate these forms of electoral participation – above and beyond the powerful impetus for Obama supporters of helping their candidate get elected. Databases and new media platforms were used to foster

social experiences to mobilize supporters. One example is BSD's "True Match" technology, used by the Obama campaign, which is "a gift-matching program that brings together new donors and their matching donors personally, so that they can meet, communicate, and reinforce one another's commitment to their common cause" (Blue State Digital, 2009). Meanwhile, there were the constant exhortations to complete micro-tasks that the campaign sent to supporters, a well-established tactic of using online tools to keep supporters busy and engaged in the campaign (Aaron Myers, personal communication, May 9, 2009). And as they participated in these activities, supporters earned reputation points that visibly displayed their involvement, a common Web 2.0 commercial strategy aimed at fostering engagement by leveraging psychological mechanisms and social status. Thus, while for citizens interactions on MyBO were often social or linked to feelings of achievement, for the campaign it was always transactional – driven by a clear set of instrumental goals.

While many of these practices fall far short of deliberative and even participatory democratic theory, these sociotechnical electoral assemblages amplify the power of social collectives. As citizens become enrolled in new material-human systems and participate with their peers on professionally-coordinated projects of social and symbolic action their reach and power in electoral politics is magnified and extended. As such, these systems offer citizens greater agency in some institutionalized political domains. Obama's campaign demonstrates that millions of small and repeat donations are a viable and powerful supplement to large donor fundraising. Supporters can bridge spatial distance and reach beyond the coasts of the United States to virtually canvass across state boundaries for little cost. The data they generate, meanwhile, is aggregated and acted upon to an extent that vastly amplifies traditional electoral volunteering. In sum, these technical practices engender new forms of collectivity with increased

agency, albeit within defined political institutions. In exchange, of course, citizens are marketed to and monitored to an unprecedented degree, even as they are fashioned into productive agents of the campaign.

Barack Obama is simply BSD's most high-profile client. The firm has worked with dozens of other campaigns, nonprofit and advocacy organizations, and firms. Given that they lease a common set of tools the core technical practices described in relation to Obama, while more sophisticated, are found in many progressive campaigns. BSD worked with Richardson for President, three sitting Democratic senators, and more than two-dozen other federal and state campaigns. It provides the online platforms and digital strategy for many of the most powerful unions in politics including the Service Employees International Union, AFL-CIO, Teamsters, and Communications Workers of America. Its nonprofit and advocacy organization clients include Wal-Mart Watch, Save Darfur Coalition, and Planned Parenthood. It has also, at times, worked with companies to pressure lawmakers on legislative matters. In 2005, for instance, BSD worked with AT&T to build an online coalition opposing cable television franchise laws in Connecticut (Lowry, 2008).

At the same time, BSD is only one firm among the dozens of digital consultancies launched in the wake of the 2003-2004 electoral cycle that have adopted similar networked campaigning practices. At sites including the "Progressive Exchange" listserv, launched by the political consulting firm M+R in 2004, nearly 4,000 digital consultants, information technology professionals, and new media marketing and communication staffers for advocacy organizations and campaigns trade resources and best practices for developing and fostering online mobilization. While the firms that provide digital consulting services vary, there is marked similarity in the technical infrastructure that powers these progressive campaigns, the

components of which include Web-sites, databases, analytic technologies, social networking applications, online advocacy tools, blogs, and e-mail management and contribution processing systems. Meanwhile, these campaigns and organizations routinely take advantage of commercial sites including Facebook, YouTube, and MySpace as mediums for marketing, communications, and fundraising. All of these applications are deployed to tailor communication based on identity, interest, and geography, as well as turn citizens into active agents of political campaigns.

Conclusion

Through following the work of former Dean staffers, this paper makes a number of analytical and historical contributions to scholarly understandings of the uptake of new media in electoral politics. Many paradigmatic accounts tell us little about what digital citizens are called upon to do and the institutional contexts within which this occurs. As is clear, powerful social and financial networks shape much of the online electoral campaigning that scholars have considered uniquely peer driven and leveled. These networks in turn produce and are constituted by new elites and organizational intermediaries that deploy new media platforms to connect citizens to political organizations and institutions. While scholars are right to point to collective action occurring outside of the boundaries of formal organizations, the literature has generally overlooked how digital media are used to dramatically extend the reach of electoral campaigns, allowing consultants to facilitate processes of control across vast geographic distances and independent of formal management structures. The tactics, systems, and data that make citizens digitally visible enable campaigns to leverage social networks, intimate details, and psychological processes for institutionalized ends. All of which extends the ability of citizens to

participate in electoral politics, but in sharply delimited domains – from fundraising to canvassing.

As this paper demonstrates, a network of digital, progressive activists was successful at coordinating social and discursive action on new media platforms while extending their work through powerful organizational intermediaries. Yet, these activists do so in ways that are very far from the participatory and consensus-based processes espoused by the New Left (Mansbridge, 1999; Polletta, 2002), their ideological precursors. Indeed, the contemporary progressive organizational and technical infrastructure extends practices of professional management. While there are new forms of citizen agency, especially in the context of collaborative electoral practices, these are largely defined by political institutions and structured by formal organizations. Meanwhile, in exchange for the expanded social and symbolic power afforded by new machine-human collectives, citizens are monitored and tracked on an unprecedented scale. These forms of campaigning, in short, are not only far from many of the claims scholars make of them, they would be unrecognizable in practice to many activists of an earlier era.

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