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Introduction

Controlling the Message in the Social Media Marketplace of Ideas

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The presidential candidate's campaign faced the threat of being derailed following a scathing depiction of him posted by an individual citizen. Regardless of whether the claims made against the candidate were truthful, the message already had gone viral, and the candidate's campaign flailed in its efforts to respond. Finally, one of the candidate's supporters not affiliated with his campaign repackaged the critic's depiction into a new theme, one that resonated positively with voters. The repackaged message itself continued well beyond its original posting as it was replicated in different forums time and time again.

The presidential campaign from which this vignette was drawn was not the 2012 contest between former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney and incumbent President Barack Obama, where the use of social media was an indispensable tool in advancing positive narratives and beating back criticism. Nor was it the 2008 election, when Obama's first campaign for the presidency demonstrated the potential that the embryonic social media could have in the race for the White House (Germany 2009; Gulati 2010), or even in 2000, when Howard Dean demonstrated the effectiveness of the Internet as a fundraising tool (Kreiss 2012). Instead, the incident actually took place during the 1828 election between John Quincy Adams and Andrew Jackson and involved the "Coffin Handbill," a poster that depicted Jackson not as a military hero but instead as a murderer for his handling of six militia men whom Jackson ordered to be executed as their sentence for desertion (see figure I.1), and a subsequent newspaper editorial that recast the charges levied against Jackson in a positive light. Although the technology of printing presses and reliance on partisan-oriented newspapers may be antiquated in the world of modern political campaigns, the lesson behind this historical episode is timeless: candidates and their campaigns must worry about who controls the message affecting their campaigns.

Information, the Internet, and the 2012 Election

The volume of information produced and consumed in today's political world is immense. Furthermore, the outlets and mechanisms that producers of information use to provide, share, and communicate this information have proliferated

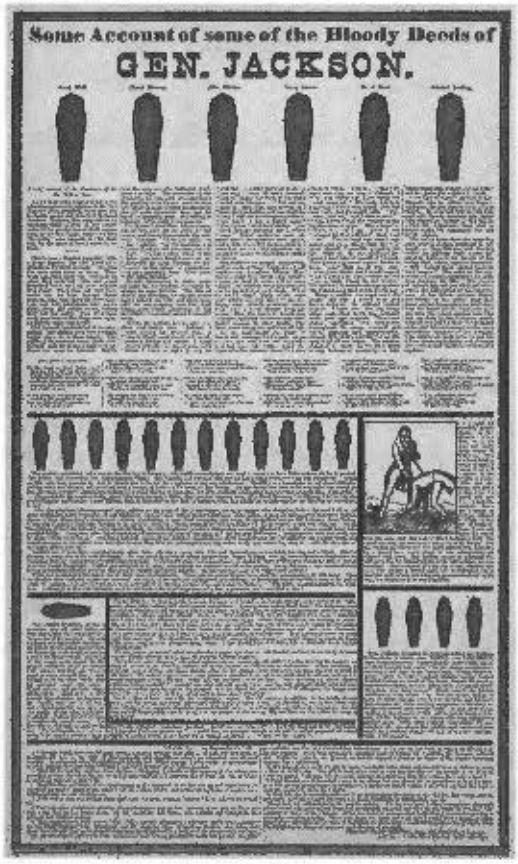

Figure I.1. The Coffin Handbill (Courtesy of the Tennessee State Library and Archives)

as new and social media have become fully infused into daily political life and contemporary election campaigns (Howard 2006; Gainous and Wagner 2011). The low-cost use of the Internet has already and will continue to have a dramatic and likely long-lasting effect on American politics. In the battle waged in the marketplace of ideas for supremacy of one's viewpoint, an uploaded video that goes viral or a simple 140-character tweet can potentially be more effective than reliance on more traditional forms of communication. Moreover, the low barriers of entry into the marketplace of ideas resulting from the technological innovations of new and social media not only create a "social media marketplace of ideas" but also promise—or threaten, depending on one's perspective—to make the nature of political discourse more democratic and less filtered. Indeed, we have reached the point where having a social media presence via a website, Facebook page, and Twitter account is a necessary means to be an effective political communicator. At the same time, however, merely having such a presence is hardly sufficient to ensure that one's message is reaching its intended audience, not being drowned out—or, worse, distorted—by competing messages.

Yet, despite all the focus on the use of new and social media in the political context, much of this phenomenon remains mysterious, if not misunderstood, by both practitioners and scholars of the political process. In order to realize the full power of new and social media in contemporary politics, one must first analyze and evaluate the implications that the corresponding free flow of ideas and information has for the American political system (see Farrell 2012; Dimitroval et al. 2014).

Such analysis and evaluation is the objective of this book. We utilize the context of the 2012 elections to study the phenomena of new and social media in American politics, with a particular focus on who controls the political message. For example, with this approach, one could examine the interaction between incumbency and using new and social media in the context of the 2012 presidential election. President Obama, as the incumbent, faced several structural advantages compared to Republican challenger Mitt Romney: no primary challengers, the ability to fundraise and spend resources solely with an eye toward the general election, and a longer lead time to dedicate to building campaign infrastructure. As a result, one would expect that Obama's campaign (and, more broadly, most incumbents) would develop more effective and innovative means to incorporate social media into the campaign as a means of controlling the campaign's message and reaching voters, as compared to the challenger. Obama's structural advantage should be kept in mind when evaluating the comparisons between the two presidential campaigns' use of new and social media in this volume, but it also highlights the reason for choosing to study the use of such media in an electoral cycle. The 2012 election context offers a time when the amount of political discourse was naturally heightened, the number of participants involved in or at least paying active attention to the political process increased, and the perceived importance of the discourse and its impact on the future and course of the nation grew.

That said, the planning and preparation for this volume started well before the general election season in 2012. Accordingly, the data and observations used in this volume were all intentionally captured and collected on a real-time basis during the 2012 election season. Interviews were conducted as interviewees were enmeshed in the political process and not trying to reconstruct their thoughts after the fact, online comments were monitored as they were posted, and video clips were viewed just as anyone in the nation with access to YouTube could have viewed them.

With the benefit of hindsight, one could wish that a certain topic was addressed in this volume or that certain methodological or substantive decisions were made differently. The benefit of the real-time research that is a foundation of this volume, however, far outweighs the trade-offs incurred by forgoing an after-the-fact analysis. The "raw" data for the studies that follow is just that—information collected truly in its most authentic form as it was contemporaneously being

disseminated and consumed by participants in the political process. The result of our strategic preparation for this volume allows the analyses included to turn the context of the 2012 elections into a more comprehensive and methodologically rigorous examination of new media's true impact.

The holistic approach of this volume was by design, for just as politicos are trying to understand the impact of new media, scholars are still searching out how best to study the phenomenon. The chapters in this book dissect the multifaceted nature of this phenomenon from similarly diverse perspectives, as scholars across disciplinary borders and analytical boundaries provide unique contributions. Importantly, the chapters in this volume offer a balanced range of methodological approaches, yet bound together by the shared context of the 2012 elections, the lessons learned from each chapter build on each other to develop a more comprehensive picture of the true impact of new and social media than the simple sum of their parts would allow.

Furthermore, this collection of studies provides us with valuable insight into several key questions. Some of these questions are process oriented, such as whether and how the communication process between candidates (and the parties and interest groups active in their campaigns) and attentive members of the mass public is different in the new media age than what we know about traditional political communication. Other questions in this vein include the following: How can candidates and campaigns leverage social and other new media to promote or at least control their message? What information is processed and retained by the audiences of the various messages? Is the impact of social media usage limited to the governing and attentive publics, who would be attuned to the messages being delivered, or do the low barriers to entry in the social media marketplace of ideas facilitate the mass public's engagement at levels not found with traditional forms of communication? What are the implications for more traditional media outlets in the era of new and social media competition? In other words, the process-oriented questions can be more finely stated as concerning who controls the message, who consumes the message, and what impact (if any) these processes have for election outcomes.

More broadly, however, the emergence of new and social media challenges us to make sense of and derive meaning from the increased speed, breadth, depth, number of messengers, choice of outlets, and diversity of viewpoints that fill the political space each day. Along these lines, one has to consider whether, in a system in which any person can share his or her viewpoint given the low entry cost into the social media marketplace of ideas, too much information can be detrimental to the American form of democracy. In many ways, the abundance of information, ideas, and outlets creates "white noise" or a "cacophony of voices" (Farrar-Myers and Skinner 2012, 116; Hartnett and Mercieca 2007) where a constant heterogeneous mixture of sounds drowns out any individual sound or voice. Considering this, one might ask whether the increasingly democratic

nature of political communication increases an individual's ability to contribute to the discourse or simply renders almost all citizens effectively voiceless. Also, can civic engagement and political participation be enhanced or even damaged by social media? What about citizen knowledge and political discourse (see Oxley 2012; Jones 2012)? Further, do and should the effects of new and social media in the political process apply differently among the governing public, the attentive public, and the mass public? To assess the true impact of these media developments fully, one must be willing to engage in a discussion of the normative implications such media bring.

Operating in the Social-Media-Driven Political Environment

This volume proceeds by engaging a number of distinct, but interrelated, themes that respond to the key questions discussed previously in this introduction. The first key theme concerns how various political actors use new and social media as they seek to control the political message in certain contexts. For example, building off interviews conducted with practitioners on Democratic presidential campaigns spanning the 2000 to the 2012 cycles and drawing on public accounts of the 2012 cycle, Daniel Kreiss and Creighton Welch's work in chapter 1 looks closely at the two presidential campaigns' use of data to model voters, the new platforms available for targeting communication, and the tailoring of communications in accordance with defined electoral goals. Their analysis yields significant insights about the relative success of these efforts, while also identifying the limits of social media usage as a means of fully controlling a campaign's information context.

Similarly, in chapter 2, Girish Gulati and Christine Williams complement Kreiss and Welch's emphasis on presidential campaigns with an analysis of underlying explanations for congressional campaign adoption of social media tools. Observing that by 2012 nearly all major party candidates for the U.S. Congress had adopted tools such as Facebook, they move the scope of analysis to examine not only how congressional candidates use social media but also which candidate characteristics explain differences in usage. Further, making use of a unique set of data gleaned from dozens of interviews with congressional campaign elites, Gulati and Williams are able to determine the strategic intentions of social media adoption. The conclusions offered in chapters 1 and 2, when juxtaposed with each other, reflect a seeming disconnect between the impact that social media could have as a campaign tool and campaigns' understanding of how to use social media to maximize their effects. Nevertheless, taken together, chapters 1 and 2 demonstrate how new and social media can, and in the current political environment perhaps must, be strategically and wholly integrated into a candidate's entire campaign effort as a tool to proactively promote and shape his or her political message, identity, and brand.

Although politicians and other participants in the process strive hard to control the political message, an increasingly democratic political discourse resulting from social media usage ensures that no public figures will be able to fully do so. Jan Kietzmann et al. (2011, 242) discuss in the business context the detrimental results that can occur when a business is not adequately prepared to protect its brand and products in the social media environment. They note that "firms regularly ignore or mismanage the opportunities and threats presented by creative consumers" (see also Berthon et al. 2007). The same can be said about candidates and other elite participants in the political process.

Several chapters in this volume address some of the "creative consumers" who could challenge candidates' efforts to establish and control the political message of their election. For example, in chapter 3, Julia Azari and Ben Stewart examine whether independent political actors (i.e., conservative and liberal groups not officially affiliated with parties or campaigns, such as interest groups, independent political action committees, and ideologically oriented media) use social media to perform a campaign surrogacy role in the twenty-first century or, alternatively, whether these groups act as campaign competitors, issuing messages that serve their own agendas rather than those of the official parties and candidates. Azari and Stewart conclude that, although independent organizations as a whole tend not to focus on a campaign surrogacy role, conservative organizations have shown a greater willingness to act as competitors to the campaigns.

In chapter 4, Robert Klotz studies candidate efforts to control the message via online videos on YouTube. His analysis indicates that campaign elites maintain a privileged position on YouTube, although even as the online video source offers a way for campaigns to bypass the traditional news media, it also provides an interactive venue for ordinary citizens to make substantive contributions to the political message. The results of Klotz's research show that the biggest losers in the rise of online video dissemination are the traditional media, whose most popular clips are those that exhibit the least journalistic control, and especially independent political actors (namely, interest groups), who spend millions of dollars yet are rarely among the most viewed clips. What these chapters help clarify is that when candidates lose control of their message—a near certainty in the social-media-driven political environment—the important matter is to be prepared to mitigate the loss of control to protect the candidate's brand and message to the extent possible.

A second theme throughout this volume is a consideration of continuities and differences across traditional forms of media and social media outlets. For all the focus on the revolutionary nature of new and social media, there is a remarkable amount of overlap and continuity with previous media forms (see Tewksbury and Rittenberg 2012; Williams and Delli Carpini 2011; Hershey 2014). Chapters 5 through 7 address from different perspectives these continuities and differences. Although each essay tackles the subject from a unique perspective and examines

a different type of social media, each also demonstrates a remarkable amount of overlap and continuity with previous media forms.

For example, in chapter 5, Regina Lawrence reports findings from a broad range of interviews with political journalists as she examines the impact that the rise of Twitter has had on news reporting, noting that the way news is reported has not changed so much as it has been shifted into overdrive. Alternatively, Mike Gruszczynski analyzes the role of negative campaign elements—specifically campaign controversies—in chapter 6. Examining the persistence of key campaign controversies during the 2012 presidential campaign through a large-scale text analysis of mainstream and new media content (namely, blogs), Gruszczynski finds that new media do not generally differ from the mainstream media in their coverage of this aspect of electoral politics. Similarly, in chapter 7, Matthew Eshbaugh-Soha investigates the differences between traditional and social media coverage of the 2012 election across a range of dimensions, including volume and tone. In his analysis—which encompasses online news, newspapers, network newscasts, cable news, talk radio, Twitter, Facebook, and blogs—he demonstrates that although social media are generally more negative than more traditional sources, the coverage patterns follow those of traditional media.

A third theme that weaves its way through this volume examines the political consequences of social media usage. As will be discussed later in this volume, successful social media usage requires a continued reliance on fundamental political techniques of generating support that will drive interest in the message being disseminated via social media and on populating social media communications with meaningful content. If these two conditions are met, does social media usage sway such things as perceptions held by information consumers about actors in the political process or the consumers' own political participation? In chapter 8, Joshua Hawthorne and Benjamin Warner investigate the extent to which social media communication influenced the way candidates in 2012 were perceived. Examining the relationship between social media communication and candidate perception across two case studies—focusing on the first presidential debate and Mitt Romney's infamous leaked comments about "the 47%"—they find that social media does indeed have consequences for candidate perceptions, though these effects were limited, context dependent, and driven by partisan factors. Work by Meredith Conroy, Jessica Feezell, and Mario Guerrero presented in chapter 9 also shows a limited and conditional social media effect, in this case on political participation. Rooting their analysis in theoretical work on citizenship norms, Conroy, Feezell, and Guerrero show that political activity on Facebook was a predictor of several forms of offline political activity but that the linkage between online and offline behaviors was conditioned by individual attitudes about citizenship in general.

In chapter 10, Todd Belt's innovative examination of the differences between commercial and noncommercial humor-driven viral videos further illuminates

the importance of generating interest and having meaningful content. Belt shows not only that noncommercial videos reach a significantly larger audience than do commercial videos (a finding that dovetails with Robert Klotz's own analysis in chapter 4) but also that these noncommercial videos are far more likely to contain identifiable political messages that reject value neutrality and are considerably more likely to encourage political action and comment on the potential consequences of the election. The lesson from Belt's work for political consultants and campaign managers is that they might well consider finding a way to give their commercial videos the look, feel, and content of noncommercial humor-driven videos, although the challenge of doing so would be balancing that goal with maintaining a professional, "serious" campaign message.

The final major theme of this volume concerns the broader questions addressed earlier and the implications that social media usage holds for the core tenets of democracy. The reduction in the entry costs into the social media marketplace of ideas enables ordinary citizens to take advantage of the burgeoning social media environment. Although promoting access and opportunity for more individuals to engage in political discourse is an indisputably worthy goal in democratic theory, what about the realities of the alleged dark side of this development: the perceived negativity and hostility on the part of the mass public that the information-technology-driven democratization of campaign communication has supposedly increased and even engendered?

To get a sense of the nature of this type of political discourse, two essays in the final section of this book directly examine, with surprising and thought-provoking results, online comment forums, often considered ground zero for democratically sourced negativity and often staggeringly hostile and offensive civic rhetoric. In chapter 11, Karen Hoffman utilizes content analysis to compare the discourse of these comment forums to mainstream media discourse, challenging the assumption that the rhetoric employed by political elites is meaningfully different from what the masses produce. Hoffman shows that comment forum discourse mirrors that of mainstream elite discourse, observing that the difference is less in what is said than in the status of who is saying it, an observation that could potentially reflect the unease of many people about the growing role of the masses in online discourse and the concomitant decline of elite power to control the message. Daniel Coffey, Michael Kohler, and Doug Granger take contemporary perceptions of mass incivility online as their point of departure and, like Hoffman, find that empirical analysis yields results inconsistent with widespread allegations of damaging civic rhetoric. Attempting to analyze the roots of this phenomenon by comparing differences in discourse in competitive and noncompetitive states during the 2012 election, Coffey, Kohler, and Granger find that campaign spillover explains the relative negativity of comment forum rhetoric, indicating that the nature of mass discourse is affected (and generally in a negative manner) by more vigorous campaign efforts by elites.

Finally, Brian Calfano extends the focus on democratically generated political messages by investigating the consequences of citizen exposure to negative comment forum rhetoric. Utilizing an Internet-based experimental research design, Calfano examines how individuals exposed to "flaming and blaming" rhetoric (i.e., discourse that negatively targets outgroups) alter their media consumption, showing that they have statistically higher rates of "hard" news consumption, selective exposure to specific media sources, reports of anger, and expressions of intolerance toward key outgroups. The analyses presented in this final section by Hoffman, Coffey et al., and Calfano provide readers with an informed foundation from which they can start to address for themselves their views of the normative questions raised in this introduction and throughout the remainder of this volume.

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