Article

Four Functions of Digital Tools in Election Campaigns: The German Case

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Abstract

This article presents a case study of the use of digital tools by campaign organizations in Germany's 2013 federal election. Based on observations and in-depth interviews with key personnel in the campaigns of six of the parties running for Parliament, I examine whether German campaigns' use of digital tools follows the usage practices that have been identified in studies of campaigns in the United States. I group how campaigns use digital tools into four categories: organizational structures and work routines, presence in information spaces online, support in resource collection and allocation, and symbolic uses. I show that these categories capture how German parties use digital tools. U.S.-based studies can thus provide helpful interpretive frameworks for studying digital campaigning in other countries. However, I also reveal that there are important differences between German and U.S.-based online campaigning. These differences stem from the different levels of intensity with which digital tools are deployed in each country.

Keywords

campaigns, parties, Internet, digital tools, online campaigning, Germany, campaign innovation, election campaigns, Bundestagswahl 2013

Digital Tools in Election Campaigns

The Internet has become an important infrastructure for political campaigns, and digital tools have become pervasive campaigning devices. They are deeply integrated into the structures and practices of political organizations. Still, somewhat surprisingly, most research on political uses of digital tools focuses on their role in collective action,

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protests, or as a perceived catalyst for political change (e.g., Bennett and Segerberg 2013; Bimber et al. 2012; Earl and Kimport 2011; Karpf 2012). This focus on the exceptional and the transformative in politics leads researchers to neglect how digital tools are used by established political actors under unexceptional conditions. Most extant research focuses on the fringes of politics while neglecting the center (for notable exceptions, see, for example, Hersh 2015; Kreiss 2012b; Nielsen 2012; Stromer-Galley 2014). This is problematic if we want to understand the true impact of the digital revolution on politics and power.

Most of the studies of digital tools in election campaigns focus on presidential campaigns in the United States. Due to the specific institutional context of the United States, these studies might not provide accurate accounts of the role of digital tools in campaigns in other countries and other electoral contexts (cf. Anstead and Chadwick 2009). This raises the importance of examining the use of digital tools outside the United States.

I aim to address these research gaps by closely examining the use of digital tools by parties during their campaigns for the 2013 federal election in Germany. I base my analysis on observations of the uses of digital tools in the campaigns, manifested in field notes, digital artifacts, and in-depth interviews with leading campaign personnel responsible from six parties running in the election. This article extends our understanding of digital campaigns by providing a detailed analysis of a country with electoral, cultural, political, and legal contexts that contrast with those in the United States.

To guide my discussion, I propose a new framework for understanding how campaigns use digital tools. This is based on digital tools' potential contribution to four central campaign functions:

1. Organizational structures and work routines;
2. Presence in information spaces online;
3. Support in resource collection and allocation; and
4. Symbolic uses.

I show that these four functions provide an intuitive means of grouping various findings on the specific uses of digital tools in the literature. This framework contrasts with Foot and Schneider's established framework of coding digital campaign content based on its informative, participatory, linking, and mobilizing features (Foot and Schneider 2006). While their framework has been influential and has provided the basis for valuable international comparisons of digital campaigning practices (Kluver et al. 2007; Lilleker and Jackson 2011; Vaccari 2013), it is from a time when digital campaigning was largely confined to Web sites. More recent accounts show that the uses of digital tools in campaigns have become increasingly multifaceted (Chadwick 2013; Stromer-Galley 2014). The organizational structure of campaigns has changed to accommodate digital tools (Kreiss 2012b). Campaigns are adapting their strategies and practices to newly available data sources that are computable through digital tools (Hersh 2015; Nielsen 2012) and extend their symbolic performances of politics to the online realm to influence media coverage and public perceptions (Anstead and

O'Loughlin 2014; Kreiss 2014). To account for these and other uses of digital tools in campaigns, we need to rethink our interpretative frameworks.

Approaching the observations and interviews from the perspective of my guiding framework revealed a surprisingly uniform picture. The general campaign functions of digital tools identified by U.S.-based studies were clearly identifiable in the uses of digital tools described by my German interviewees. German parties thus seem to follow the same kinds of uses identified in the U.S. literature. However, I observed important differences between the United States and Germany. In general, German parties aimed to integrate digital tools into their larger campaigns. Interviewees even went so far as to state that there was no such thing as a separate "online campaign." Parties predominantly used in-house personnel for the planning, administration, and sometimes even the design of digital tools. The interviewees did not cite international campaigns as reference points but, instead, emphasized their own party-specific learning opportunities during the General Election of 2009 and various state elections. Overall, German parties mainly seem to use digital tools to try to influence media coverage and to get around the filters of traditional media outlets. For most parties—the Green Party, the Pirate Party, and the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) being the exceptions—digital tools are not significant for the collection and allocation of resources. Overall, while there is a degree of convergence between the United States and Germany on some common aspects of online campaigning, in Germany, digital tools are not as central to the broader campaign as in the United States and they are less intensively deployed.

Four Functions of Digital Tools in Election Campaigns: Organizational Structures and Work Routines, Presence in Information Spaces, Resource Generator, and Symbol

In recent years, the roles of digital tools in election campaigns has attracted considerable attention from researchers. Early research focused predominantly on digital content provided by campaigns, either on Web sites or social media profiles (Foot and Schneider 2006; Kluver et al. 2007; Lilleker and Jackson 2011; Vaccari 2013). While this has led to a valuable and strongly interconnected body of research, various authors have turned from the analysis of digital content to examine the impact of digital tools on the organizational structures of campaigns (Kreiss 2012b), routines and practices of personnel (Nielsen 2012), and the interconnection between campaigns' digital efforts and media coverage (Kreiss 2014).

A significant number of studies in this field focus on three exceptional campaigns—Howard Dean's campaign of 2004 (Hindman 2005, Kreiss 2012b) and Barack Obama's campaigns of 2008 and 2012 (Kreiss 2012b, 2014; Vaccari 2010). These campaigns are obviously exceptional cases, even in the U.S. context, so we should be careful not to treat these as ideal types. Still, while the Dean and Obama campaigns are best seen as outliers, some studies have started to show that the general patterns identified in these exceptional cases seem to hold for other campaigns (Gibson 2015;

Stromer-Galley 2014). Thus, the campaigns of Dean and Obama might offer us insights into some of the general functions digital tools can perform for campaigns.

We can use the wealth of findings drawn from these and other U.S.-based cases to identify digital tools' significant general functions. Here, I present such a framework, grouping the specific uses of digital tools identified in existing research into four categories. First, digital tools have influenced the organizational structures and work routines of campaigns. Second, they have been used to influence a campaign's presence in the information space online. Third, they have been used in support of resource collection and allocation. Finally, digital tools have been used by parties for symbolic purposes. Next, I discuss these functions in greater detail.

Organizational Structures and Work Routines

Digital tools have impacted campaigns at the fundamental level of organizational structures and daily work routines. Specialists in the use of digital tools have become ever more central in the organizational structures of campaigns and have started to become part of the campaign elite (Kreiss 2012b). Specialists have also become crucial in decisions on how to allocate resources, evaluate activities, and produce campaign content, in a process Kreiss terms *computational management* (Kreiss 2012b). Digital tools have also become central in the daily working practices of nonelite campaign workers. This is especially true for "mundane" tools—such as e-mail (Nielsen 2011). Finally, campaigns and politicians use public reactions to politics on social networking sites such as Facebook or Twitter increasingly as informal cues to assess public opinion (Anstead and O'Loughlin 2014; Chadwick 2013; Hamby 2013; Kreiss 2014).

Presence in Information Spaces Online

Early discussions of the impact of digital tools on political campaigns focused on campaigners' potential to use Web sites to post information and thereby circumvent the gatekeeping function of traditional media (Bimber 2003; Bimber and Davis 2003; Wilhelm 2000). Although much of the current debate focuses on the potential of digital tools for mobilization and online donations (Hindman 2005), the presence of political actors in political communication spaces online remains an important function in political campaigns (Stromer-Galley 2014). This is especially true as the Internet is increasingly becoming a trusted news source (Edelman 2015).

In analyses focusing on the uses of Web sites by campaigns, studies regularly find high levels of information provision (Foot and Schneider 2006; Gibson et al. 2003; Lilleker and Jackson 2011; Vaccari 2013). Campaigns thus seem to use their Web sites very actively to provide interested visitors with direct unfiltered information. Increasingly, studies also show that campaigns use digital tools to interact with political bloggers to prompt them to cover specific aspects of the campaign in the hope that this will attract coverage by traditional media. In other words, they use digital tools to indirectly influence the communication environment during a campaign (e.g., Karpf 2010; Stromer-Galley 2014). This process is enabled by traditional media's

willingness to incorporate information found on blogs, YouTube, or on Twitter in their coverage (Anstead and O'Loughlin 2014; Chadwick 2013; Farrell and Drezner 2007; Hamby 2013). Also, campaigns try to use social media to reach younger voters they might otherwise be unable to contact (Stromer-Galley 2014).

Support in Resource Collection and Allocation

Digital tools have proved very valuable for generating political donations in U.S. campaigns, and this has enhanced the status of digital strategists (Hindman 2005; Kreiss 2012b; Stromer-Galley 2014). In addition, digital tools appear to be increasingly important for U.S. campaigns to mobilize and coordinate volunteers (Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez 2011; Kreiss 2012b; Nielsen 2012). U.S. campaigns also increasingly use digital tools to collect and aggregate data on potential voters and supporters. Based on these data, campaigns build models of voter mobilization, persuasion, as well as individuals' propensity to donate money (Hersh 2015; Issenberg 2012; Kreiss 2012b, Nickerson and Rogers 2014; Sides and Vavreck 2014). For U.S. campaigns, these particular uses of digital tools are becoming central.

Symbol

Digital tools have also been used very consciously by political actors to convey specific attributes of candidates and parties. This has involved creating digital content that is in step with online communication culture, to attract media coverage focusing on innovative or controversial usage practices, as well as to illustrate campaign momentum. Campaigns now use rhetoric associated with the digital revolution and try to attract endorsements from public intellectuals and entrepreneurs prominent in the development of digital tools. Specifically chosen phrasings and public interactions thereby become symbols—this practice can be termed *cyber-rhetoric* (Kreiss 2011, 2012a; Stromer-Galley 2000, 2014). Campaigns also use digital tools to create humorous or controversial content that will attract media coverage focusing on their usage practices.

Increasingly, publicly available online metrics of campaign activity, such as a candidate's Twitter mentions or number of Facebook fans, are becoming objects of media coverage to illustrate a campaign's momentum (Jungherr 2012a). This has become the digital equivalent of traditional "horse-race" media coverage. At the same time, journalists and politicians now use digitally mediated public reactions to campaign media events such as televised debates in discussions of which candidate or campaign "won" (Anstead and O'Loughlin 2014; Hamby 2013). Through this coverage of the "digital horse race," publicly available metrics on campaign activities are becoming de facto symbolic representations of a campaign's momentum.

Germany as a Contrasting Case

Germany offers an interesting context for examining campaigns' uses of digital tools. In general, Germany and the United States differ significantly with regard to their

media systems, political communication systems, political information environments (Hallin and Mancini 2004; Pfetsch 2001), and system-level variables associated with campaigning styles (Esser and Strömbäck 2012; Pfetsch and Esser 2014). More specifically, campaigns in Germany are fought in the context of a two-tier electoral system based on proportional representation and significantly lower campaign budgets. Also, in Germany, nationwide election campaigns are organized by central parties and not by organizations founded and led by leading candidates, as occurs in the United States. These factors have been identified as potentially influencing the use of digital tools by German parties (Geber and Scherer 2015; Stier 2015; Zittel 2010). My aim here is not to explain the use of digital tools by German parties with reference to contextual, organizational, or individual factors but to assess the value of an interpretative framework developed on U.S.-based findings. It suffices, therefore, to point out that Germany is an adequate contrasting case.

Method

This case study is based on my observations—in the form of field notes and my collection of digital artifacts—of parties' uses of digital tools as well as in-depth interviews with key personnel from six parties running in the election. This inductive and qualitative approach has been proven in previous work in this field (Chadwick 2013; Kreiss 2014; Nielsen 2011; Vaccari 2010).

To establish context for my notes and to account for the motives of campaign professionals, I conducted a series of semistructured interviews with key campaign personnel. The first wave of interviews was conducted before the election during the summer of 2013. The second wave of interviews started after the election in spring 2014. Interviewees were selected for their centrality in the planning and execution of digital campaigning in their parties. As parties differed significantly in how they organized their digital roles, the job titles of my interviewees varied. I spoke with Thomas Diener, head of dialogue in the Free Democratic Party's (FDP) Department for Strategy, Dialogue and Campaigning; Robert Heinrich, a campaign manager for Bündnis 90/Die Grünen (Alliance '90/The Greens); Dr. Stefan Hennewig, the Christian Democratic Union of Germany's (CDU) head of personnel and the Supporter Campaign teAM Deutschland; Mathias Richel, in-house consultant for the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD); Dr. Markus Riedhammer, head of politics 2.0 for the Christian Social Union of Bavaria (CSU); and Matthias Schrade, campaign coordinator for the *Piratenpartei*. Unfortunately, representatives of the German Socialists (Die LINKE) and the new Euro-sceptic party AfD declined to be interviewed for this project.

While one is probably well advised to interpret answers given by campaigners on their behavior and motives with some caution (Berry 2002), various interview-based studies have shown their worth (Chadwick 2013; Kreiss 2012b; Vaccari 2010). That said, this approach has a limitation that should be kept in mind when interpreting the results. Germany's two-tier electoral system means that some candidates for Parliament fight local campaigns to win districts and thus directly enter Parliament. But parties

also fight a central campaign to increase the total number of candidates they are allowed to send to Parliament. My results only speak to the use of digital tools by German parties in their central campaigns (for the uses of digital tools by candidates in their constituency campaigns, see Geber and Scherer 2015; Zittel 2009, 2015).

Four Uses of Digital Tools in the Campaign for Germany's 2013 Federal Election

Organizational Structures and Work Routines: Integrated Campaigns

Probably the most interesting theme emerging from the interviews with German campaign professionals was their strong objection to the term online or Internet campaign. Robert Heinrich (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen) put this most strongly, but his sentiments were shared by most other campaigners:

> We should see the Internet as a natural part of campaigns. I find the incessant talk about online-campaigns really irritating. If it were up to me, I would prefer people stopped using the term altogether.

Thus, in the eyes of campaigners, digital tools have become so central to the organization, performance, and day-to-day workings of a campaign that they are not seen as separate elements of the campaign. Instead, all parties use digital tools to support traditional campaign elements and functions.

There were differences among the parties with regard to the position of personnel responsible for digital tools in the campaign structure. One approach was to establish a dedicated online department (CDU, CSU, and SPD). This structure was situated below the campaign leadership on equal levels with traditional departments—such as press or marketing. All campaigners emphasized the importance of flat hierarchies and fast reaction times. In contrast, campaigners for the Green Party and the Pirates emphasized that they had no dedicated online teams. Instead, digital tools were integrated in the workflow of their regular staff.

There was very little evidence of "computational management" (Kreiss 2012b). Some campaigns tracked user visits and interactions on their Web sites or profiles on social networking sites in rudimentary ways (CDU, CSU, and SPD). Information gained through these evaluations was used to assess content placement. Still, this information was not seen as important for general decision-making during the campaign. Other parties—the FDP, the Greens, and the Pirates—were much more cautious in using software to track user interactions. Interviewees gave diverging reasons for this. Some invoked German privacy laws or, in the case of the FDP and the Greens, specific pro-privacy policy positions. The Pirates cited a lack of financial resources. Still, nearly all campaigners emphasized the potential to use digital tools to gather quick feedback on the campaign's performance. This could be feedback gleaned from their own supporters on social networking sites or closed online groups, or from the use of professional tools that track the volume and sentiment of political talk online.

For the most part, parties used their own staff to plan and manage the use of digital tools. Often the technological development of tools and Web sites was provided by firms closely connected with the party (CDU and SPD). Smaller parties tended to outsource the technological development of their tools. Nearly all parties used professional communication agencies to make decisions on design. But nearly all interviewees emphasized how their campaign workers' experiences with digital tools during previous campaigns had been useful for engaging supporters and critics online.

Thus, German parties have integrated digital tools into their work practices and organizational structures. However, while digital tools seem as deeply integrated in the day-to-day practices of German campaigns as in the United States, the digital teams do not seem to have achieved as central a role as they did, for example, in the Obama campaigns. The reason for this is the much smaller role of "computational management" in German campaigns.

Presence in Information Spaces Online: Web Sites and Social Networking Sites

Web sites were central to the campaigns of German parties for the federal election of 2013. Still, there were major differences between the parties' approaches to design, content, and strategy. In fact, Web sites came to mirror the central narrative of each campaign. Campaigners for the SPD, the Greens, and the CSU emphasized the centrality of the Web site:

> For us the Web site was the most important element. There we publish content that was not determined or edited by others. . . . Everything we do should pay dividends for our Web site. (Markus Riedhammer [CSU])

> We believe . . . that our Web site is still the most important source if a user wants information about the SPD. If you google SPD you're directed to our Web site; if you search for our party platform you're directed to our Web site. This makes the Web site central to our efforts. . . . I believe that of the public's impression of everything we do online 70 to 80 percent of these impressions focus on our Web site. . . . We react to this by our banner ads on news platforms and other popular online services. The normal user visits these sites, sees our ads by which we direct him to our Web site. (Mathias Richel [SPD])

Richel emphasizes two points: First, party Web sites were the most visible elements of campaigns online and thereby were of high importance. Second, the campaign worked very consciously, for example, through online advertisements on news portals or contextually relevant Google ads during the televised candidate debate—to attract users to their site.

Richel also emphasized how important it was to actively "push" political information to online users. Users who voluntarily "pull" political information were to him only a minor part of the audience for online political information. In his view, for political actors, the Internet was as much of a push medium as traditional media.

Robert Heinrich raised a similar point while discussing the Greens' use of social networking profiles:

> We attempt to do very little exclusively on social networking sites. Instead, we want to draw as many users to our Web site as possible. We believe that it is smart to bundle all our activities on one site. Thus, we try to have the heart of our online campaign on our Web site. There we try to mobilize and to inform. All other campaign elements online are satellites with the aim to draw people to our Web site. This is how Obama did it and we believe this makes sense.

In a follow-up conversation, Heinrich qualified this statement. While he still held the Web site to be the most important digital element of the campaign, he also stated that following the 2013 campaign, the Greens were developing specific strategies for the use of their Facebook profiles because their supporters did not tend to click through from Facebook to their party Web site. This learning process was also evident in the use of Web sites and social networking sites by the CDU. Stefan Hennewig argued that the CDU tried to use their Web site to attract visitors to their presence on social networking platforms and get them to voice their support for the party there:

> Our Web site is important in the campaign. Still, I'm not sure if it is the most important element. In a recent relaunch for the campaign we changed our strategic goals for the Web site and, therefore, also changed its structure. Our new goal is to use the Web site not as a landing strip for politically interested users but instead as a runway for politically active users. And in this context politically active means politically active on the social Web.

There were also differences in Web site design. The strongest contrast was visible in the design of the Web sites of the CDU and the SPD, shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2. The CDU chose a design dominated by one image, accompanied by short text snippets, illustrating recent events during the campaign. In contrast, the SPD used a Web site that in design and content was inspired by online news platforms. The SPD Web site featured a very prominent banner inviting visitors to further engage with the campaign—by posting on social networking platforms, checking out further information, or registering for the get-out-the-vote effort. These design decisions mirror the campaigns' central narratives. The CDU focused visitors' attention on selected content often featuring their leading candidate Angela Merkel. This focus on Merkel was also prominent in other campaign elements and was only logical given her strong public support in opinion polls. The leading candidate of the Social Democrats, Peer Steinbrück, proved to be a challenge for the campaign as media coverage focused on his personal gaffes, and he enjoyed little public support. Consequently, the SPD focused much more strongly on issues and on publicizing their get-out-the-vote effort. This campaign strategy is mirrored in the design of the SPD Web site.

Robert Heinrich (Die Grünen) also emphasized the importance of digital tools for presenting political information. In 2013, for the first time in Germany, the Greens used specifically designed and edited graphical elements on their Web site guiding the
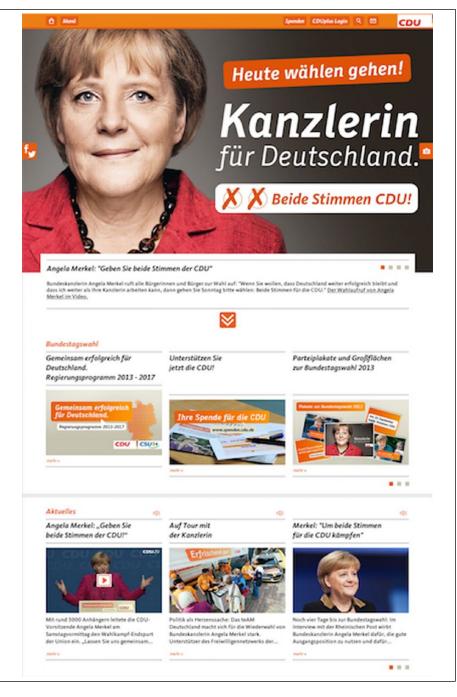
Figure 1. CDU Web site: Screenshot taken on September 22, 2013.
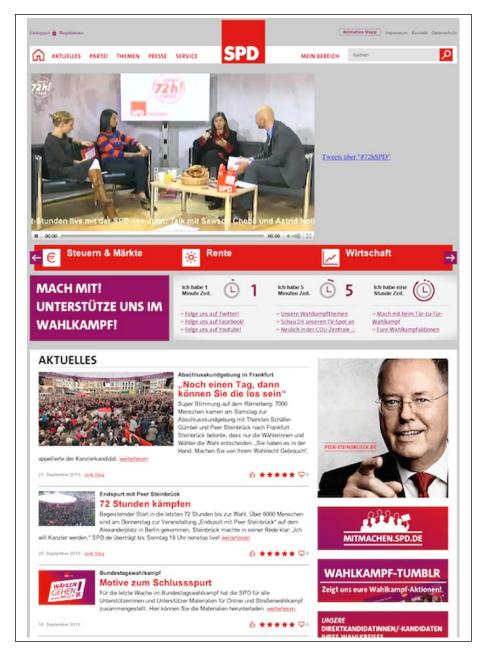*Note.* CDU = Christian Democratic Union of Germany.

Figure 2. SPD Web site: Screenshot taken on September 22, 2013.
Note. SPD = Social Democratic Party of Germany.

Figure 3. Bündnis90/Die Grünen Web site: Screenshot taken on September 1, 2013.

visitor through a two-minute tour of key elements of the party platform (shown in Figure 3). In so doing, in their use of digital tools, the Greens also echoed their campaign's major themes while experimenting with new forms of political communication online. Heinrich told me that one million Web site visitors used this feature. Thus, they clearly reached exceptionally high visibility. Consequently, Heinrich cites this tool as one of the central campaign innovations by the Greens during the 2013 campaign cycle.

Parties also used different channels for providing their supporters with information unfiltered by traditional media. The CDU focused strongly on YouTube. The party even equipped their headquarters with a small television studio from which

campaigners were able to provide live coverage during important campaign events. Consequently, the campaign produced a comparatively large number of YouTube videos and provided live commentary by politicians accompanying the televised leaders' debate on the main CDU Web site. Similarly, during the last three days of the campaign, the SPD used prominently featured video streams to provide short clips illustrating the campaign and coverage of important campaign events with their leading candidate. These activities showed that both the SPD and the CDU consciously used digital tools to provide alternative political coverage of their campaigns, independently of traditional media. For the SPD, this was particularly important as traditional media coverage proved to be very critical of their leading candidate. Campaigns also used their presences on social networking sites such as Facebook or Twitter very consciously to interact with journalists and to get them to quote their candidates:

> We do not want the press to write about the fact that Sigmar Gabriel is on Facebook. Instead, we want them to write about what he says on Facebook. We want to be quotable with our social media presences. We followed through on this with the announcements of the shadow cabinet. We announced each member first on Twitter before announcing her or him in a press conference. This introduced completely new dynamics in the news coverage. . . . During the campaign, it was very difficult for us to get the media to cover our positions. But these new practices allowed us to determine our own exclusive news items. This was very important for us. (Mathias Richel [SPD])

Statements by other campaigners echoed this position. Campaigners thus used social networking sites very consciously to communicate with journalists and to influence the media agenda. This echoes the use of social networking sites by politicians in other countries to influence what Chadwick has called the "political information cycle": the increasingly complex interaction between political actors, journalists, and citizens in the evolving coverage of political events (Chadwick 2011, 2013).

Support in Resource Collection and Allocation: The Limited Role of Fund-raising Online

German parties have had mixed success in using digital tools for fund-raising. Campaigners for the CDU and the SPD stated that online fund-raising was of no great importance for their campaigns, although Stefan Hennewig (CDU) stated that online fund-raising had picked up somewhat when compared with 2009. Mathias Richel (SPD) added that online fund-raising might play a stronger role in the campaigns of local candidates. Two reasons might contribute to the limited importance of online fund-raising for German parties. First, several campaigners argued that Germany's regulations for political fund-raising mean that a donation only helps a party if it is above 5 to 6 Euros. Donations below this value create administrative costs surpassing the donated sum. This makes many of the small donations routinely collected by U.S. campaigns of little interest to German parties. Second, most supporters of parties donate money by voluntarily increasing their monthly membership dues. This is an

easy and habitually used channel for political contributions in Germany, and it significantly reduces the potential for online fund-raising.

However, in contrast with these assessments, smaller parties did report efficiently using online tools for fund-raising. The Greens managed to collect the equivalent of 270,000 Euros online. The Greens were particularly keen to get supporters to donate money to pay for cinema ads and billboards at dedicated locations. This success built on the experience of the Greens in the 2009 campaign, when they managed to collect a similar amount of dedicated donations.

During the 2013 campaign, the Euro-sceptic AfD staged a heavily publicized fund-raising event online. For forty-eight hours, the campaign ran what it called a "Money bomb for Germany." Over this short time, the campaign raised 432,751 Euros given by 6,200 donors. Although the party did not exclusively count donations given during this time span through online channels, this success can be attributed to their use of digital tools because the party used its online presence to mobilize for this fund-raising event. In this case, the AfD clearly followed examples from the United States where fund-raising drives are routinely used to attract media coverage.

Many parties offered supporter platforms for volunteers: teAM Deutschland (CDU), MITMACHEN.SPD (SPD), and Wurzelwerk (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen). In their design and use of the platforms, all parties built on their experiences going back to campaigns in 2009 and 2005. The SPD in particular focused in the 2013 campaign on the use of MITMACHEN.SPD and their platform for professional campaigners KAMPA.NETZ. Both platforms were designed to provide technological infrastructure for the party's get-out-the-vote (GOTV) effort. In both—the design of the platform and the emphasis on GOTV—SPD campaigners were clearly inspired by U.S. campaigns while developing tools in accordance with German privacy laws. Differences from U.S. campaigns become obvious once we examine the functionality offered on these platforms and their use in the campaigns. First, in contrast with the United States, German parties did not make much use of their supporter platforms for raising donations. Second, the GOTV effort was limited by the fact that these platforms largely reproduced local party structures. Supporter platforms of German parties might be more efficient as symbols of campaign momentum and participatory practices than as tools for persuasion and mobilization (Jungherr 2012a).

Finally, it should be mentioned that digital tools provided the Pirate Party and the AfD with technological infrastructure that was vital for their campaigns. Without digital tools, parties not represented in Parliament would have found running coordinated campaigns much more difficult.

In assessing the importance of digital tools for resource collection and allocation, we therefore have to distinguish between big established parties—such as the CDU or SPD—and new or small parties—such as the Green Party, the Pirates, and the AfD. On the whole, the big and established parties now appear to have funding and mobilization mechanisms in place and feel less pressure to develop new mechanisms. In contrast, small or new parties seem much more ready to experiment (the Greens) or they might simply depend on digital infrastructure (the Pirates and the AfD) to get their campaign going in the first place.

Symbolic Uses: Cyber-Rhetoric, Merkel-Raute, and the Digital Horse Race

Over the course of the campaigns, German candidates tried very consciously to publicly communicate their knowledge of digital tools and their grasp of social change associated with the digital revolution. Some candidates adopted the use of cyber-rhetoric very openly in public statements, interviews, or opinion pieces. Others organized press events where they could be seen using digital tools and interacting online. The direct interactions between leading candidates and the public did not matter much for these events. What mattered was that the candidates were seen by journalists to interact with people online. While German candidates clearly mirrored the symbolic activities and rhetoric of American candidates, German campaigns aligned themselves with representatives of Germany's digital tech-sector to a much lesser degree. An exception to this was the SPD, which recruited Gesche Joost, a professor of technological design, into Peer Steinbrück's shadow cabinet. This ensured the SPD positive Internet-related press coverage.

In 2009, the SPD and political activists were very successful in using digital tools to influence the public narrative of the campaign (Jungherr 2012b). In 2013, the initiative shifted to the CDU. Early in the campaign, the CDU asked supporters of Angela Merkel to send in digital snapshots of their hands forming a typical hand gesture used by Merkel—the fingers of both hands touching and forming a diamond shape—which came to be known as Merkel-Raute (Merkel's diamond). The campaign received 2,800 snapshots of supporters showing Merkel's signature gesture. The party used a collage of these snapshots to create a huge poster depicting Merkel's hands in the diamond gesture at a prominent spot in Berlin (see Figure 4). Unsurprisingly, this campaign device created a lot of attention in the media and online; it even spawned a Tumblr blog on which remixes of this motif were collected. This campaign poster conveyed a strong focus on the candidate with relaxed irony. It was a clear example of the convergence of online and offline campaign elements and the successful use of digital media to create traditional media coverage.

The digital horse race mattered little to campaigners from all parties. Nearly all interviewees stated in no uncertain terms that their total number of fans on Facebook or followers on Twitter mattered little to them. Instead, their focus was on how many people reacted to their posts and interacted with their social media profiles. This view offers an interesting contrast to 2009 when all campaigns communicated their total reach on social media platforms very proactively to journalists and the public (Jungherr 2012a). One reason for this change could be the absolute dominance of Angela Merkel on Facebook. From early on in the campaign, Merkel's fan count was much higher than Steinbrück's. The digital horse race between the leading candidates, therefore, offered no suspense and consequently little incentive for journalists to cover it.

Differences in Degree Not in Kind

In 2013, German parties used digital tools very confidently and consciously in support of their larger campaign. In 2009, parties seemed to use digital tools—especially

Figure 4. The "Merkel-Raute" billboard shown at Berlin main station.
Note. Picture courtesy of CDU-Bundesgeschäftsstelle.

various forms of social media—predominantly for their own sake, or for the sake of being seen to be using them. In 2013, campaigners reasoned much more confidently about which digital tools they should use to achieve specific goals and which they could consciously ignore. This was the result of an intraorganizational learning process that took place between 2009 and 2013, and which allowed campaigners to assess the use of digital tools in practical campaign contexts. As a consequence, there was very little evidence that digital tools were seen as a "game changer" for political campaigns or as fundamentally restructuring the political balance of power. Instead, digital tools were seen as ubiquitous campaign elements. They were seen as changing organizational practices and some elements of political performance but not as fundamentally transformative agents. Online campaigning seems to have disappeared as a campaign element in itself but digital tools seem to have become integrated in the campaign as a whole and seem to be routinely used in support of various campaign functions and elements.

In general, in 2013, German campaigners used digital tools to fulfill campaign functions similar to those identified in the literature on U.S. campaigns. The differences between German and U.S.-based online campaigning stem from the differing levels of intensity with which digital tools are deployed. For example, although digital tools are used for fund-raising in Germany, interviewees—with the notable exception of Robert Heinrich (Green Party)—ascribed little importance to this. This contrasts sharply with the U.S.-based literature, where fund-raising has been identified as one of

the most important aspects in the use of digital tools for campaigns (Hindman 2005; Kreiss 2012b).

In the 2013 campaign, the main emphasis was intraorganizational learning, not emulating international examples. A statement by Stefan Hennewig (CDU) illustrates potential reasons for this:

> Of course your own experiences have a deeper impact than experiences you are told about by others. For example, you meet international campaigners on these typical three-day-meetings. You arrive on Friday. On Saturday, representatives of six campaigns, or so, are speeding through case studies presenting their campaigns, their experiences, and their learnings. Of course, you exchange some words during the coffee break. But still, best case: you can take a few examples or observations from these cases back home and maybe you can adapt them to your campaign. But still, this is very different from really experiencing a campaign and thereby knowing how to adapt experiences and learnings to your own contexts.

German campaigners were conscious of U.S. digital campaigning but claim not to have copied it. Instead, they spoke of having developed methods suitable for their specific campaign environment. How and to what extent general technological affordances are translated into specific campaigning practices will depend on system-level contextual factors, budgetary and legal restraints, specific campaign contexts, or even individual decisions by a campaign leadership. To fully understand the impact of digital tools on campaigns requires that scholars move away from simply analyzing the political content campaigns post online and toward a focus on the embeddedness of digital tools in organizational structures and practices.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

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