Using the Internet as a Tool for Political Change

Gianluca Giansante

Abstract

The Internet offers unprecedented opportunities to stimulate and organize participation and political change. If everyone, however, has access to the same Internet opportunities, why do some campaigns succeed and others fail? The first obstacle has to do with an awareness of the tools' capabilities: The Internet can open up a staggering array of opportunities, but we must know how to take full advantage of them. This paper provides research findings and practical information on online communication strategies in politics. Based on communication research and real-world political-campaign experience, the author examines how the Web and social media are used to boost political participation.

Introduction

Effective online communication is a key element for political campaigns as well as information, opinion, and mobilization campaigns. It is useful for helping to win elections but also in the social realm, helping to influence institutional decisions and build consensus for social change as well as to attract volunteers, donors, and voters. An Internet connection is all that is needed to launch an online petition and create a social-network profile. The Internet offers unprecedented communication opportunities. Before the emergence of digital media, enormous resources were required to start up a newspaper, television channel, or radio station. Today, however, everyone has the means necessary to spread their individual message to an audience of potentially millions of people.

If it is true that everyone has access to the same Internet opportunities, why do some succeed and others fail? Why are some campaigns met with such enthusiasm, able to raise money and boost

participation, while others use the very same digital tools only to be passed over practically unnoticed? The first obstacle has to do with an awareness of the tool's capabilities: the Internet can open up a staggering array of opportunities, but we must know how to take full advantage of them.

Can the Internet 'Move' the Vote?

From time to time, the debate over whether or not the Internet alters how people vote resurfaces. The topic is multifaceted, replete with various competing elements. In fact, voting behavior analysis is one of the most complex issues in the field. There are nonetheless a few constants in the equation.

First of all, it is important to note that the question, posed in these terms, does not address the real concern. It has long been recognized that the stability of partisan loyalties both between and during election campaigns plays a crucial role in political behavior (Lazarsfeld *et al*. 1944; Berelson *et al*. 1954; Converse 1964, 1970). There is ample support for the claim that it is quite difficult to persuade someone who has voted for a party or candidate in the past to then vote for the opposing one. It is certainly impossible to do so with a tweet or a post on Facebook. Neither does publishing greater quantities of content on the web typically produce significantly better results.

However, it must be pointed out that "moving" the vote is not the principal purpose of the web in politics. Limiting web use to this end reflects a reductive approach, one that fails to recognize the potential of the medium. In fact, the web can do much more than move the vote: it can *move people*. Candidates and organizations can cultivate a relationship of trust with people over time, inform voters, report on work done and goals reached, and respond to questions and criticism. Thus they can build a lasting relationship with a group of people who will be their first supporters, who will work as activists or volunteers or simply speak well of the candidate or organization to their families, friends, and colleagues.

In this sense, we can say that, if used correctly, the Internet can provide a great deal of visibility, encourage participation, and contribute to building consensus, thus increasing the number of votes a party or candidate receives. This much is known and understood by candidates for even the humblest of offices at the local or municipal level, where the effects of their efforts are more easily measurable and where access to television and the press is more difficult to obtain and its benefits often marginal. A well-organized online strategy can make the difference between an invisible campaign and an adventure that inspires the passion and participation of a large group of people. All of this can be replicated – on a larger scale, of course – for campaigns at the regional or national levels, which benefit as well from the visibility that results from integrating the web and traditional media (A. Chadwick 2013).

Does the Internet Change Politics?

The development and broad accessibility of digital technologies has opened a debate which for some time has been dominated by two opposing factions. On one side are the optimists or utopians, who expected the web to radically democratize society, increase competition among parties, and reduce the influence of the élite. On the other side, the supporters of *normalization* argued that the Internet would change absolutely nothing in how Western democracies function and certainly would not contribute to the advent of new political players and mediators (Margolis and Resnick 2000).

As so often occurs, the truth is somewhere in the middle, or in any case rather distant from both extremes. It appears quite evident that technology does not *automatically* increase democratic participation. The Internet offers possibilities, but the goals it is used to achieve always depend on decisions made by political players (A. Chadwick 2006). Digital media do not all have a single outcome; the results always depend on the uses to which they are put. Results are also affected by the responses of *relevant social groups* (Bijker 1995) – in our case, the general electorate, political

associations, and target voters – that can determine the success or failure of new initiatives and the directions they take. In other words, technology does not change society; it is *people using technology* who change it (Karpf 2012, p. 7).

Similarly, the web does not erase the distinction between large powerful parties and minor ones or between candidates with significant financial backing and those without adequate resources. On the contrary, the ability to invest permits candidates to better develop an online presence and reach ever larger audiences, in much the same way that the degree of candidates' popularity at the beginning of a campaign influences how much attention the mass media pay to each one, and thus the likelihood that voters will visit their websites.

The consensus seems to be that the impact of new media is not irrelevant. Kranzberg's First Law of Technology states this concept quite well: "Technology is neither good nor bad; nor is it neutral" (Kranzberg 1986). That the web has a role in changing politics is a point that many scholars agree upon, but it must be asked *how* these technologies influence the process.

First and foremost, they can reward some candidates while penalizing others. It is undeniable that the Internet played a crucial role in Barack Obama's victory over the heavily-favored Hillary Clinton in the 2008 American presidential primary elections. The same phenomenon can be observed in many other countries, where on numerous occasions outsiders have carried elections, often thanks to effective use of the web. A particularly telling example is the electoral success of Italy's Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S), or Five Star Movement, a party that has no physical headquarters and exists only online. In the 2013 parliamentary elections, it garnered 25.56%, or nearly 9 million, votes – only slightly fewer than the parties with established infrastructures throughout the country and with long political traditions. Clearly, without the web these results would simply not have been possible.

Of course, the web was not the only factor in its success; the economic crisis, dissatisfaction among voters with the traditional parties, and several concurring elements also contributed.

Nevertheless, there seems to be little doubt that without effective use of the web, not only would the M5S have been unable to grow, it would never even have been born (Biorcio 2013).

Another important development brought about by the web has been the displacing of the focal point, from the political class to the common citizen. The ability to interact, ask questions, publicly voice one's criticisms, direct the flow of opinion, and determine political choices represents a key shift. As happens in business and in every type of established power structure, the political class thus lose their dominant role and are forced to cede a share of their power, to come down from the privileged position where mass media had placed them and deal directly with the voters. Political leaders may yet choose not to do so, but they risk exposing themselves, with no recourse to response, to the judgment of the people, who now have a more powerful instrument with which to express their opinions. This is not to say that voters did not have this capacity before. Chatting at the bar or at work, for example, has always been an opportunity for praise and complaint alike. Now, though, they are more visible: they can grow in number and truly make their voices heard. This has had an undeniable effect on the political process.

Using the Internet to Boost and Organize Participation

For a long time, politicians have used the web with the idea that on the other side of the screen were undecided voters looking for information on the various candidates' platforms to help them make a choice. Many sites still present material online that reflects this mindset. The flow of information is unidirectional, presenting principles and platforms, photos, videos, and press reviews. None of these uses draws full advantage of the web's possibilities.

There is a lamentable lack of awareness among political organizations about how web use has changed among the voting public. By the 2000 US presidential primary elections, various political consultants were beginning to realize that the principal users of their sites were not undecided voters in search of information: they were the candidate's own supporters. A seminal

study on the role of campaign websites in American elections confirmed this observation (Bimber and Davis 2003). It should always be kept well in mind that the web audience is quite different from the broad, indistinct television audience. In most cases it is an audience of supporters or at least people who have a favorable view of the candidate, often even real activists for the cause. Those who read the blog, become friends or fans on Facebook, or follow on Twitter are very different from the general mass-media audience. This is important to remember because, in addition to providing information to these people on campaign efforts and themes, the web can be used to ask online followers for a helping hand and get them involved in support activities. Many of them will be more than happy to do so.

Online Participation

The key rule of online communication is often summarized by the expression "Content is king" – that is, content is the most important element in the effort to get a message out. Another expression captures an aspect of equal importance: "Community is queen." The group that takes shape around a person or organization is fundamental to communication regarding an idea, a candidate, or a political initiative.

The most effective way to enhance the online visibility of your message is to get supporters involved in the effort. Every person who follows you on social media can contribute by sharing the message with his or her contacts with the click of a button. This is the simplest and most immediate form of participation, involving the greatest number of people, and is the first step toward weightier forms of involvement.

Online participation can begin with sharing messages on Facebook or Twitter, which can lead to them going viral. It can also include original content created by supporters in the form of blog posts, tweets, or videos. In this case, the first step to take in securing their participation is the simplest: ask for their help. The best way to get it is to be simple and direct, making one request at

a time. At the end of a post, you can ask people to share or retweet it. In the days leading up to the election, you can ask your Facebook fans to post a status update that invites their friends to go out and vote.

The web, then, can be a tool for creating awareness, even global awareness, of a political topic. An example of this took place in the spring of 2014, when, after an Islamist terrorist group had kidnapped 200 girls from a school in northern Nigeria, #BringBackOurGirls was launched across several social media channels. Celebrities, activists, ordinary citizens, and even the US first lady, Michelle Obama, posted videos and held placards featuring the hashtag to raise awareness and demonstrate solidarity with victims and their families. The risk of these types of activities, of course, is that over time, the attention paid by mass media and public opinion declines without having effected any real political change.

The web can also be quite successful in introducing political matters for public debate, as was the case with the attention that grew around the hashtag #IfTheyGunnedMeDown. It began with the fatal shooting of 18-year-old Michael Brown, an unarmed black teenager in Ferguson, Missouri. Even before the street protests became dramatic, an online mobilization had already raised questions about media coverage and racial issues.

One tweet drew particular attention. Tyler Atkins, a 17-year-old high-school student from Houston, Texas, posted a picture on Twitter of himself in a tuxedo with a saxophone around his neck, next to a photograph of himself in a black T-shirt with a blue bandanna tied around his head and his finger pointed at the camera. The first picture was taken after a jazz concert at the High School for the Performing and Visual Arts in Houston, where Mr. Atkins was studying music. The other was taken during a recording for a rap video he made with friends for a school math project. Like hundreds of young African-Americans, he placed his pictures under the hashtag #IfTheyGunnedMeDown, protesting Mr. Brown's killing by a police officer and the way young black men are depicted in the news media. He said that Mr. Brown's identity was distorted and

filtered through negative stereotypes, and that the same would have been done to him with the bandanna image if he found himself the victim of a similar event. (Vega 2014)

Since the #IfTheyGunnedMeDown campaign began, the phrase has been used on Twitter more than 168,000 times, which has contributed to raising awareness on the use of pictures in fostering negative stereotypes about black men. The campaign produced an important early result. The image NBC News used of Michael Brown that spurred the Twitter response showed him with the fingers of his right hand extended in what some considered a peace sign but others called a gang sign. In a subsequent article about Mr. Brown's killing, the network used a different photograph that showed him wearing headphones and gazing at the camera, just a normal kid, the boy next door.

Information can also be accompanied by a request for donations, as was done by the Ice Bucket Challenge, a phenomenon that spread in no small measure thanks to the hashtag #IceBucketChallenge. The challenge involved people getting doused with buckets of iced water on video, posting that video to social media, then nominating others to do the same, all in an effort to raise awareness and research funding to cure amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), a progressive neurodegenerative disease that affects nerve cells in the brain and the spinal cord. People can accept the challenge, make a donation to an ALS charity of their choice, or both. Following the online mobilization, the ALS Association received $94.3 million in donations in the month of August 2014 alone, compared to $2.7 million during the same period the previous year. These donations came from existing donors, along with 2.1 million new donors to the association.

Online participation can also assume forms that reflect well-organized mass movements. An interesting example of web use for spreading political messages is the Italian #salvaiciclisti ("save cyclists") movement, which used the web to call for better conditions and improved security on the roads to protect bicycle riders. Born on the web, as can be seen by the use of the pound sign or hash mark (#), which is associated with Twitter, the movement uses social media to speak to people

directly. It reflects the mobilization of British cyclists and supporters around the hashtag #cyclesafe in the wake of a manifesto published by *The Times* of London. While in the UK the effort was driven from the top by an influential daily newspaper, the situation in Italy developed rather differently. On October 8, 2012, at noon, a group of 38 bloggers simultaneously published a letter to the 25 principal newspapers requesting that they adopt *The Times*' manifesto and campaign. They invited all of their readers to send a letter to their contacts and the 25 newspapers and to republish it on their own blogs, Facebook, and Twitter with the hashtag #salvaiciclisti. The movement was able to attract the attention of the media and the political world to its cause, which led to institutional commitments and interventions by, for example, the city of Milan and the province of Rome. The #salvaiciclisti hashtag represents a successful experiment in *digital critical mass*, the spreading of a message based on the participation of a large number of people, as one of its organizers explained: "We transformed every single user and reader of the platform into a repeater and every blog into a transmitter broadcasting a single message" (*Vortex* 2012, p. 136).

The web can also be used to build consensus around petitions and political propositions and to influence institutional decisions. It is ever more effective in keeping politicians connected and up-to-date with opinion movements that are organized online. According to a study by Edelman (2011) conducted in eleven different countries on five continents, one-third of political staff members changed their opinions on matters of policy due to information they found online. Stimulating significant participation online, then, can be a useful means both of spreading information and of influencing opinion and decisions.

Campaign supporters can be effective in reaching other people and growing the support community. Various studies have shown that, while trust in advertising and marketing communication has fallen, faith in the opinions of friends has in fact risen. According to Marketo (2012), fully 92% of people polled trust and rely on the advice of friends. One way to take advantage of this is to ask supporters to invite five friends to register for the campaign newsletter,

sign a petition, or take part in a political initiative. It is a way of getting them involved that requires minimal investment of time and energy and starts them up the “ladder of involvement” (Kreiss 2012). Once they have contributed in some form to the campaign, it is more likely that they will do so again in the future, quite possibly in more substantial ways.

Consistently providing a variety of options for people to get involved is key to maintaining energy, momentum, and commitment. Supporters can be asked to take part in a contest to decide on a video for the campaign to use, but there need to be ways for people with less time to invest to participate as well. An example might be making it possible to vote or comment on the ads proposed by other users. By making things easy for people, activities like these increase the probability of starting people on the ladder of involvement while reserving ample opportunity for a group of more engaged activists in the support community to contribute in weightier and more substantial ways.

Having an active and participatory online community of supporters is also of fundamental importance for dealing with attacks from opponents. A carefully formulated response by the person being criticized can certainly be effective, but the rallying of supporters in defense is infinitely more so. A clear case in point is the series of responses of Obama supporters to Republican claims that he was a Muslim, a terrorist sympathizer, and unpatriotic. The widespread reaction of the community of supporters, who made liberal use of wit and irony, served not only to defend Obama’s reputation but to transform the barrage into a boomerang that ultimately did far more damage to the accusers than to their target.

Offline Participation

The web is often thought of as separate from physical reality. This dichotomy, very popular in the early days of the web and still reflected in the linguistic opposition of the “virtual” and “real” worlds, has deep roots that continue to influence perceptions today. There is a tendency to forget

that behind every comment, tweet, and post there are people, relationships, and physical realities; what happens online does not necessarily stay there. Online events often serve as starting points for larger ones that take place offline in the form of public forums, mobilization efforts, or petition drives. The fact is, what happens online is *already* a physical event. If a person publishes a comment on your Facebook page, this is not an event that takes place in a "virtual" reality, some otherworldly realm. There is a *physical person* typing and expressing an opinion that he or she has probably already shared at the pub or at dinner with family or friends. It is one he or she will most likely continue to voice, unless he or she receives information to the contrary that causes him or her to reflect and reconsider the issue.

It should be remembered that the web is used to its full potential *only* when it serves to generate action *outside* the world of the web. The entire online communication strategy must be formulated with this end in mind: promoting offline support action through participating in events, mobilizing other voters, encouraging donations of even small amounts, and, obviously the most important of all, getting people out to vote.

The Paradigm Shift in Political Communication: From Persuasion to Mobilization

In many countries, the political context has mutated radically. The first point to consider, macroscopic in nature, is the increased distance between party activists and the electoral base, between political organizations and the citizens they are meant to represent. This phenomenon can take extreme forms, described succinctly by the term "anti-politics." The second point is the great decrease in participation, as evidenced by several indicators: party registration, signature collection, attendance at demonstrations, activism, and above all, voting. The ubiquitous nature of this phenomenon is cause for serious reflection.

In countries with historically high election turnouts, like most European nations, it has simply been taken for granted that citizens would go to the polls. Low voter turnout has always

been considered a foreign problem, characteristic of faraway places like the United States. However, over the last 40 years, voter turnout has been steadily declining in the established democracies (Niemi and Weisberg 2001). This trend has been significant in the United States, Western Europe, Japan, and Latin America. Recent election seasons have demonstrated that abstention is a growing phenomenon even in countries with a long tradition of political participation. A case in point: municipal elections in Rome historically reflect a very high participation rate, but the May 2013 elections drew only slightly more than 50% of registered voters to the polls, representing a 20% drop over the previous elections just five years earlier.

Any online political communication effort must take this into account. In this context, the web, as has been shown, is not an end unto itself but a means to achieve political ends that must be part of a larger overall strategy. It is at its most beneficial when used to stimulate participation on election day, which ought to be the central objective of campaign communication. The current situation, as described above, calls for a paradigm shift in political organizations in general and in electoral campaigns in particular.

There are two options for garnering votes. Until recently, in most countries with traditionally high voter turnouts, the preferred path was that of persuasion, which entails convincing voters not inclined to vote for your party to change their minds. This has convinced some of the necessity of “moving to the center” and promoting a more moderate political vision. This path, however, presents two great difficulties. First, it is directed to the so-called “undecided voter,” a right and proper myth, the political Holy Grail. There are, in fact, very few truly undecided voters: only about 5%, according to various estimates (Liegey et al. 2013a). In addition, few change their minds during election campaigns. Most form their opinions slowly, through the experience of daily life. There is little or no use in bombarding them with data on the eve of the election.

The second path to earning votes is mobilization, or encouraging people already leaning in your direction to actually go out and vote. Efforts are directed at those who voted for your party or

coalition in the previous elections but are tempted not to vote at all this time. As we have seen, the number of people who fit this description is already high, and it is constantly growing. Rather than seeking to change the opinions of a very few voters who have, in any case, never supported your policies or party, it is much more productive to work to convince people who have voted for them in the past to go out and do so again.

Returning to the example of the recent municipal elections in Rome, although the center-left coalition emerged victorious, it lost 400,000 votes compared to the 2001 elections and nearly 500,000 compared to those of 1997. In other words, there are hundreds of thousands of people in Rome who consider themselves center-left but neglected to vote for their party's candidate or did not vote at all. This means that abstainers who in the past have supported the center-left account for more than 30% of voters. This example effectively illustrates the point made above: there is little use in trying to persuade a very few voters who have never supported your party or policies to change their minds; you will obtain much better results by working to convince past supporters to go out and vote once again.

Recent research has shown this is possible, and that there are tools that are very effective in mobilizing voters. Various studies agree that the most effective way to convince a voter to go to the polls is to establish human contact and engage in a dialogue. Citizens are more easily persuaded if they are visited by a volunteer than they are by exposure to other forms of communication, such as leaflets, fliers, posters, or emails (Issenberg 2012; Sinclair et al. 2013). This is most evident in the United States, where voter abstention is at a historic high. Decades of experience have contributed to the refinement of the techniques of canvassing, or making direct contact with potential voters by going door to door. Well established in the United States and Great Britain, this practice has typically been viewed with considerable skepticism in many other countries. Recent experience, however, has demonstrated that mobilizing volunteers and direct door-to-door contact can make all the difference, even in contexts outside the Anglo-Saxon world.

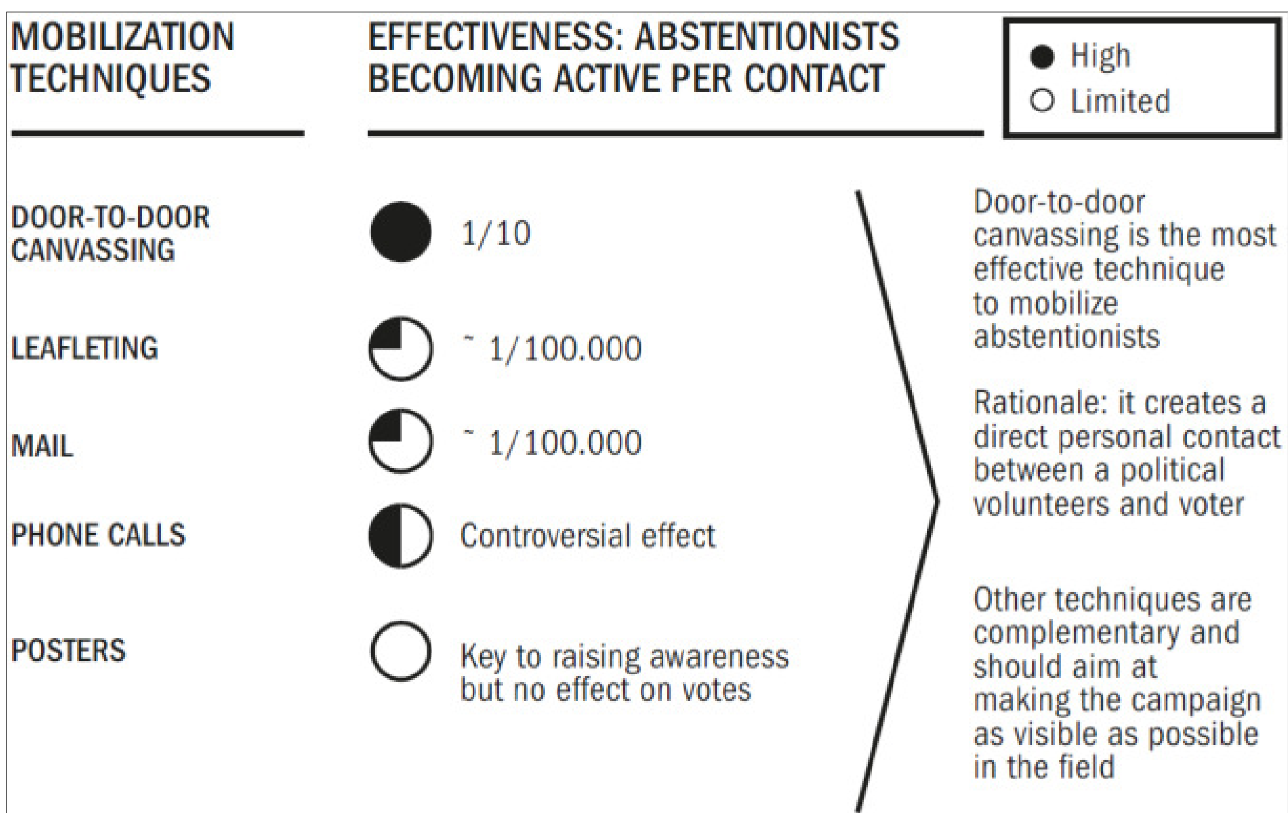
How Volunteers Knocked on Five Million Doors in France's Presidential Elections

Guillaume Liegey, Arthur Muller, and Vincent Pons are three young Frenchmen with impressive résumés who had every reason to expect to embark on brilliant careers in their country's institutions or big businesses. They had studied at universities long established as the breeding grounds of France's future leaders and completed graduate studies in the most prestigious institutions of the United States. Their work as volunteers for the 2008 Obama campaign would alter the path of their well-laid plans. They witnessed the workings of the American electoral machine firsthand, learning campaigning techniques that were dramatically different from those used in European campaigns, which were still tied to traditional methods like leaflets and posters that cost too much and produce too little.

They returned to France with a mission: to grow a grassroots mobilization to contribute to the victory of Socialist candidate François Hollande in the upcoming presidential elections. This was no easy task. Not only was the right firmly in power in France, as in many European countries at the time, but the French Socialist Party was notoriously averse to innovation. The young men's ideas and proposals met with resistance right from the start; they were derisively labeled "the Americans," no compliment in a traditional French context. They began by publishing a study that compared and contrasted several techniques for mobilization, analyzing the effectiveness of each as measured by the number of abstainers activated per person contacted (Liegey et al. 2010). The results confirmed their hypothesis (see Fig. 1): distributing leaflets persuaded one voter for every 100,000 contacted. Home mailings obtained a similar result. Telephone calls had more controversial effects, with various studies producing opposing results. Campaign posters may be important for enhancing a candidate or party's visibility, but they do not appear to have an influence on the vote itself. They showed the most effective method to be door-to-door canvassing, which permits campaign volunteers and activists to make direct contact with citizens. This technique

produces one voter for every ten people contacted. Appropriately managed, going door to door is the most effective means of mobilizing abstainers because it creates direct personal contact between the volunteer and the voter, bringing the political apparatus closer to the citizen and reminding him or her that behind a seemingly cold and distant organization there are people working passionately for the common good.

Fig. 1 Comparing different mobilization techniques. (Reproduced from Liegey *et al*. 2013a, p. 13)



Following this study, Liegey, Muller, and Pons managed to convince the Socialist Party to conduct a mobilization experiment in a small local election in which 80 volunteers contacted 18,000 voters in eight low-income areas of the Parisian suburbs chosen from among those with the highest levels of abstention of center-left voters. The results were as expected: they were able to increase participation at the polls and, what's more, they received positive feedback from both voters and volunteers, who reported feeling involved in a more interesting and dynamic form of political participation. The encouraging outcome of the experiment led them to apply the technique on a national scale, organizing the largest mobilization effort ever seen in Europe. The campaign recruited 80,000 volunteers who knocked on 5 million doors and contacted nearly 10% of the electorate, resulting in a significant increase in votes cast on Election Day.

Door-to-door canvassing also produces a variety of other advantages. First among these is its economic efficiency. The total costs associated with the experience described above were far lower than other forms of communication, with only online communication carrying similar costs. Another advantage is that it allows the political organization to reinforce its relationship with its constituency and, thanks to better awareness of voter opinion and concerns, to make more effective choices in strategic planning. During the course of the Hollande campaign, three soldiers and four Jewish civilians were murdered in Toulouse and Montauban by a man who claimed to have ties with al-Qaeda. The killings had a profound effect on the country, captivating the media and public opinion for several days. Some of Hollande's advisors urged him to take advantage of the opportunity to make a clear statement on matters of security. Others insisted that this would put too much focus on a theme on which the Socialist Party was rather weak and one which the right had traditionally been strong. Direct door-to-door contact with voters revealed that the party's base was far more interested in seeing the focus remain on the campaign's key strategic themes of economic and social reform. This convinced the candidate to stay the course, which was consistent with the results of cognitive linguistic studies of political communication (Lakoff 2004).

The Hollande campaign reflects important advances, not only in terms of voter participation but also because it re-engaged people in the political process. New forms of activism and mobilization produced positive experiences for members of the electorate as well as for party members and campaign volunteers.

Where, then, does this leave the Internet? If mobilizing volunteers and establishing direct contact are the most efficient means of getting voters involved and out to the polls, do technological tools serve only to give the campaign an air of sophistication and modernity? The answer is a resounding "no."

The French experience clearly demonstrated that the web was a key element in the Hollande campaign's success in organizing citizen contact and voter participation on such a broad scale. Hollande's campaign staff made use of the web at every stage of the initiative: to build consensus around and trust in their candidate, to grow interest in the operation, to mobilize volunteers and train them in new forms of political action, and to organize small citizen-contact groups. These efforts were supported by an online publication for field organizers, who were the leaders of small local groups. The value of the web was even more evident in the creation of an online organizational platform, which allowed volunteers to get and stay in contact with local groups, communicate their availability, and download lists of itineraries and instructions for neighborhood canvassing. The web made it possible to provide continuous support and respond to any questions or needs of volunteers spread across the country through direct online contact with a small core of central coordinators. The campaign was thus able to organize a very efficient operation, taking best advantage of the available human resources to produce impressive results.

It is thus clear that, far from rendering the campaign mechanical and distant, the web provided tools that humanized it, bringing it closer to the people and placing people and relationships at the center of the political process.

Using the Web to Organize Participation

The French experience provided an excellent example of how the web can be used to help reach a political campaign's strategic goals. The web is a fundamental tool for listening to citizens, getting them involved in decision-making, and creating and maintaining a bond of trust that motivates them to participate actively in the campaign by enhancing the political message's online visibility and also taking action *outside* the web.

The significance of this is highlighted by recent research. A study of the American presidential elections of 1996 and 2000 demonstrated that people who used the web for activity related to the campaign were more likely to participate in other electoral activities, including the vote itself (Mossberger *et al*. 2008). Another study conducted in 2004 confirmed those findings: those who visited a candidate's website were more likely to send emails, participate in political initiatives, encourage others to vote, and make donations to the campaign (Park and Perry 2008). In short, online participation reinforces rapport and increases the likelihood that people will participate in offline activities, contributing to the achievement of the campaign's strategic objectives – which, as we have seen, can lead to impressive results in terms of building consensus and voter participation, thus exerting a significant influence on election results.

Communication on the web, then, must be considered "not as a closed process, but as the first of two phases in which online mobilization concentrates initially on particularly engaged segments of the population, who then work to persuade much larger sectors through the exponential effects of interpersonal communication both online, especially by means of social networking, and offline" (Vaccari 2012, p. 240). How, though, can the web actually be used to stimulate offline participation?

The first level of participation is attendance at political events, which presents an opportunity for a candidate to meet citizens face to face and reinforce political consensus. Inviting

fans on various social media sites can serve as a very powerful incentive, as anyone who has ever invited Facebook friends to an event knows very well.

In the political arena, one of the first great mobilizations organized principally, though not exclusively, on the web were the M5S's V-Day[1] events. The first, in 2007, held in 179 cities according to leader Beppe Grillo's blog (Grillo 2007), succeeded in collecting 332,225 signatures for a proposal for legislation barring convicted felons from government office and another for a general reform of electoral law.

Online participation, as we have seen, can be a first step toward greater involvement. The community of people who participate on the web can be invited to invest more of their time and energy in ever more influential ways. The web can be an effective tool for recruiting volunteers to participate in the campaign's mobilization efforts or inviting supporters to form local committees or join existing ones; people commit themselves more readily when they work as part of a group. The web also provides an excellent means of organizing the efforts of local committees through direct contact with the leaders who coordinate activity at the local level. The web also makes communication materials available to volunteers, who can then print and distribute them. Local groups thus take responsibility for this action, dramatically cutting the campaign's printing and shipping costs.

In any case, and for all activities, the ultimate objective must be kept well in mind: get people out to vote and – it bears underscoring – prepare them to vote *correctly*. Ballots can vary and are often rather complicated, and there is an ever-present risk of making an error – for example, when voters must manually write in the candidate's name. Even in this case, the web makes it possible to produce clear instructions which can then be reproduced and distributed by local groups.

[1] In September 2007 and April 2008, Grillo called his online following into city squares for protests known as "*Vaffanculo* Day" or "V-Day," named for an Italian expletive. The two V-Days drew hundreds of thousands of protestors in Italy's largest cities, with the first calling for the expulsion of convicted criminals from Parliament and the second decrying Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's control over the news media. Grillo transformed these protests into a political movement he called Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5S) or the "Five-Star Movement," which was organized entirely online. In less than three years, the financial crisis and the European debt crisis have made his movement, made up of individual citizens entering politics under Grillo's banner, the second-largest political force in Italy.

The web, though, is a tool not only for stimulating participation but for *organizing* it as well. There are a number of digital platforms that can be used to coordinate and prepare physical meetings. Among the most noted is Meetup, used by, among others, the M5S to start local political action groups. They used the platform for a variety of purposes, examined in an interesting essay by Damien Lanfrey (2011). Most importantly, it was used to create a space to discuss various topics Grillo and other activists proposed, both in online debate and in direct contact with citizens at public events. In a secondary and supportive fashion, the meetups served as points of connection for hearing opinions, identifying problems, and determining citizens' needs and expectations. Each activist became a node, gathering and sharing information using both online tools (the Meetup forums, but also blogs and various wiki sites) and offline ones, such as setting up information desks or booths. These activities took on a fundamental role in building consensus because they reflected an awareness that effective communication relies most especially on understanding the audience's points of view, as was Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts Tyteca recognized in their seminal work on the matter (1969).

Yet another use of Meetup is as a tool for organizing political activity and citizen-activists themselves, from distributing leaflets to collecting signatures, from demonstrations to raising awareness of specific topics. Meetups are used to organize three principal activities (Lanfrey 2011): collecting and disseminating information, from simple leaflet distribution to managing web-based information portals; environmental action, such as opposing the construction of incinerators or supporting recycling; and, finally, action related to so-called lifestyle politics, such as forming groups to purchase organic products or promote critical consumption and fair-trade practices.

We have seen how the web can be used alongside parties and other traditional organizations, providing tools that introduce new forms of political participation. The most important are those used to organize citizen mobilization. We have observed that direct contact by volunteers is the best way to convince a sympathetic voter to actually cast a ballot on Election Day and that the web

is an excellent tool for *recruiting* volunteers. Putting these two elements together, however – a large group of volunteers and an enormous number of people to contact – is no easy task. John Kerry's staff in 2004 learned this when, the day after his speech at the Democratic National Convention, more than one million people registered online to offer their time as volunteers. The number was spectacular but very difficult to manage. Not surprisingly, most of them were never contacted by Kerry's staff and their willing offers produced no value for the campaign (Kreiss 2012).

Technology can provide effective solutions. This is best exemplified once again by the 2008 Obama campaign. The staff appreciated the fact that they had an enormous database of potential voters, collected on VoteBuilder, and a powerful platform for organizing volunteers, PartyBuilder, both developed under Howard Dean's leadership of the Democratic Party by the staff who had served him during the presidential primaries. The problem, though, was that the two platforms did not communicate with each other. They launched the Neighbor-to-Neighbor Project to integrate them, putting volunteers in contact with potential Democratic voters. It allowed volunteers to download lists of people to call or contact in person; they could then update the list with information culled from their conversations. This made it possible to gather important data on the reactions of the people contacted, how they were inclined to vote, if they were as yet undecided, and if they might be persuaded to change their minds. The system also permitted staff to access the list of volunteers, organized by region, and activate and direct them as needed.

This was the first step toward using the technology in more sophisticated ways, which led to the development of my.barackobama.com in 2008 and to Dashboard in 2012, two social platforms created to stimulate and organize volunteer participation. The latter in particular rendered activists' efforts easier and more engaging. By simply registering online, all volunteers could identify the nearest group of supporters and see a list of local groups to join. They could also access a list of people to contact by telephone. They could look up their own statistics at any time and see – or

show friends – how many email addresses they had collected, how many phone calls they had made, how many had received a positive response, how many team meetings they had attended, and so on. This reflected the "gamification" of the campaign effort, or the introduction of competitive elements that made the experience feel like a game, which had the effect of producing ever higher levels of activist commitment and involvement.

This is clearly a very advanced use of the technology, one that is neither always necessary nor even always possible, especially for small campaigns. The lesson remains a valid one: the web can be used to support most of a campaign's strategic activity, from early mobilization to the organization of volunteers at the polling stations on the day of the vote. The uses to which the web is put depend less on the technology itself than on the specific needs of each campaign.

Influencing the Agenda: New Forms of Organization for a New Political Situation

The birth and growth of the web inspired enthusiasm for what some predicted would be the creation of *organizations without organization*. The web made it possible to launch a petition, publish informational content, and get people working together for a common cause. Reality soon dashed these hopes: anyone can speak online, but very few are heard. Changes in the technological context, however, have without doubt opened new options for political organizations and have contributed to altering the situation. The growth of the web has given birth to new political entities, organizations with a *different* organization, as defined by David Karpf (2012), who has written a particularly important book on the topic.

Political organizations, in using the web, have undergone a profound transformation that Karpf defines as "the MoveOn effect," from the name of the American association that first took advantage of the web's potential for political organization. MoveOn has used the web to inform and mobilize public opinion, influence the political agenda, raise funds, and contribute to presidential election campaigns. Its influence is due in no small measure to its development of a

series of significant innovations in political campaigns, including in modes of production and diffusion of communication content.

Historically, campaigns have reflected a *top-down* mindset, with messages defined by the organization's staff, perhaps with the assistance of a specialized consulting agency. The 2004 presidential campaign was a welcome opportunity to renovate this model. In preparing an anti-Bush advertisement, MoveOn decided not to call in a video production company. Instead, it held an online contest in which more than 1,500 people participated and more than 100,000 voted, thus assisting a panel of experts in selecting the finalists. The public was even involved in the next step, raising the funds needed to have the video broadcast during the Super Bowl, American football's championship match, which provides the most viewed – and thus the most coveted – television advertising time in the United States.

The forms of communication and organizational processes are thus changed. Participation is no longer the last leg of the journey; it starts during the first stages of the project. The fundraising model is modified, leading not to abstract general commitments but, through concrete initiatives, to tangible results. This reflects a new characteristic of such political organizations. Supporters are involved in every key phase of decision-making, from selecting target issues for political action to deciding which candidate to endorse in presidential elections. The ability to *listen* constitutes a distinctive element of MoveOn, whose former director of research and development, Daniel Mintz, summarizes its idea in a phrase that captures the spirit of the organization: "Strong Vision, Big Ears."

Some observers have criticized the new forms of online organization, claiming that action taken amounts to little more than "clicktivism," a type of online participation that has little effect on the political process. This view does not take into account the fact that these organizations' supporters, besides participating online, take action locally. The most significant evidence of this was in support of the Obama campaign, in which 933,800 activists dedicated more than 20 million

hours to mobilization activity. Volunteers in swing states were organized into local groups, while those in states where either victory or defeat was practically assured took part in the Call for Change project, calling voters in the swing states and urging them to vote. During the same campaign season, MoveOn displayed remarkable effectiveness in fundraising: its supporters donated a total of $88 million.

Another of MoveOn's characteristics worth considering is its organizational structure. Rather than employing a large central staff and building an imposing bureaucracy, MoveOn invested in small groups of activists connected on the web. When it required additional human resources, it relied on external personnel only as long as necessary and on a case-by-case basis. Staff members worked wherever suited them best, obviating the need for central offices. With these limited organizational obligations, costs were contained and more could be spent on developing products and reaching goals. This presents characteristics similar to other post-bureaucratic organizations (Bimber 2003).

The example set by MoveOn clearly illustrates a more general phenomenon. The web has given birth to a new generation of bottom-up organizations known as "netroots" (from "Internet" and "grassroots"; in other words, *spontaneous* organizations) that reflect the role of digital media in these rapidly changing times. Though each is quite different in character, these organizations nonetheless share a few basic traits, as Table 2 shows. They reflect the concerns of the general public, mobilizing activists on the most controversial issues of the moment; they involve citizens in large-scale collective action; and they have web-based organizational and communication strategies (Karpf 2012). It is interesting to compare these characteristics with those of earlier generations of political organizations, such as parties and labor unions (first generation) and the so-called NGOs, or nongovernmental organizations (second generation).

Table 2 Core features of three generations of political associations. (Reproduced from Karpf 2012, p. 26, by permission of Oxford University Press, New York, NY.)

Era	**First generation (1800s–1960s)**	**Second generation (1970s–early 2000s)**	**Third generation (2000–present)**
Membership type	Identity-based	Issue-based	Activity-based
Typical activities	Attending meetings	Mailing checks	Attending local meetups
	Holding elected office	Writing letters	Voting online
	Participating in civic activities	Signing petitions	Submitting user-generated content
		(Armchair activism)	
Funding source	Membership dues	Direct mail	Online appeals
		Patron donors	Patron donors
		Grants	Grants
Dominant organization type	Cross-class	Single-issue	Internet-mediated
	Membership	Professional	Issue generalists
	Federation	Advocacy organizations	

The web provides organizational tools that are important not only for electoral campaigns and for growing citizen participation, but also for maintaining consensus for institutional action and supporting it with new forms of mobilization. In this respect, Organizing for America (OFA) serves as an essential point of reference.

Established following the election of Barack Obama to the White House to support his political initiatives and mobilize supporters, OFA represents the first instance of an organization directly and explicitly tied to a presidential administration. For the first time, a governing party organized broad action to support its efforts. OFA was created to promote and sustain mass support for the president in enacting his political agenda. The web became an essential tool for maintaining contact with the president's supporters and the association's members and for inviting them to take part in mobilization efforts. Emblematic of this was the petition to support gun-control reform regarding weapons sales, which was signed by 1,400,000 people, unprecedented in American history. OFA represents an interesting example of the new forms of organization, whose mission

has been neatly summarized in a phrase reported by Karpf (2012, p. 77): "to provide online tools for offline action," which is characteristic of many netroots associations.

One last form of organization that has direct bearing on action intended to influence the political agenda is creating collective blogs, which can be used as discussion platforms, for sharing opinions, and to create consensus around projects, candidates, and organizations (or, of course, against them). These activities have even greater importance when they involve a large audience and when they are successful in linking online organization to offline activities. This reestablishes and reinforces face-to-face interaction, an element that appeared clearly to be in decline but which can now be reactivated and reenergized through careful use of online instruments. An example of these forms of participation comes once again from the United States, with the creation of *Daily Kos*, a progressive blog that receives hundreds of thousands of visits each day. Its annual convention is a large-scale media event and, by virtue of the blog's great visibility and influence, the political positions it supports demand and hold the attention of political representatives.

These examples demonstrate that technology is not only a communication infrastructure and a tool for mobilization: it makes it possible to develop new forms of participation and to create "places" where a new style of democracy can be exercised (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013). The web can be a force for coalescence, for engaging people in activism, even people who had previously distanced themselves from politics. We must, however, be clear on one point: the web provides instruments that permit participation, but it does not create participation. The results always depend on how political organizations use it.

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