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In a Social Campaign, What Role for the Press?

A conversation with UNC's Daniel Kreiss

By Andria Krewson



NORTH CAROLINA — Eight years since Howard Dean's presidential run took the country by storm, how are the Internet and social media shaping the 2012 campaigns? How are campaigns and their supporters exploiting the latest advances—and what challenges do these trends pose for journalists?

For insights on these questions, I recently corresponded by email with Daniel Kreiss, an assistant professor at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill's School of Journalism and Mass Communication. Kreiss's forthcoming book, *Taking Our Country Back: The Crafting of Networked Politics from Howard Dean to Barack Obama*, follows a group of young Internet staffers who met during the Dean campaign, created innovative online organizing practices, and later launched prominent political consulting firms that influenced other elections—including Obama's 2008 bid for the presidency.

Kreiss is currently conducting ethnographic research on the campaign to defeat North Carolina's Amendment One, which would constitutionally ban gay marriage, and is planning an interdisciplinary study of media production at the Democratic National Convention in Charlotte. An edited transcript of our exchange appears below.

As political campaigns move farther into the new media realm, they are increasingly finding ways to target their messages to individuals, rather than online destinations—what Romney adviser Zac Moffatt has called “remarketing.” What implications do these trends have for journalists’ responsibility to check the claims coming from campaigns, and for the media’s ability to shape the debate? Is there a risk traditional media will be cut out of the loop?

While the vast majority of campaign resources **continue to be spent on traditional advertising**, without question, the biggest area of growth this cycle is in online advertising. And it's true that campaigns are increasingly leveraging **multiple data sources** to deliver targeted online advertising to individuals based on characteristics they share with other members of the electorate.

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Traditionally, this targeting is checked by the ability of institutions such as the press to monitor the claims of candidates and keep them honest. Journalists, for instance, can **monitor and publicize** the attempt of candidates to promise different things to different voters.

I believe that journalists will continue to have both the ability and responsibility to play this role—but they will have to keep up with changing strategic communication tactics through innovations in coverage. ProPublica’s **compiling of the targeted emails** that the Obama campaign sends is a great example of how journalists can insert themselves into individualized information flows and open them to public scrutiny. There are also other opportunities. Crowd-sourcing the collection and analysis of the online advertising that individuals see, for instance, would advance our understanding of how campaigns target the electorate and help us discover patterns in strategic communications. Journalists can **track the field efforts of campaigns**, which use people as media to deliver targeted communications.

What has the coverage of the campaigns’ shift to the digital/social media world gotten right, and what has it gotten wrong?

The press coverage of digital and social media is much more sober in 2012 than it was in 2008, which is heartening. It seems as if journalists are settling in to exploring how new media is incorporated within institutionalized electoral politics, rather than looking at new media through the lens of the possibility for transformational change.

One growing area of coverage is attention to the privacy implications of political data, particularly in the context of delivering targeted media to individuals. A number of recent articles have advanced our knowledge of how this industry works, from Kate Kaye’s **excellent work on online advertising** to a **spate** of recent **pieces** that have explored data and targeting in the 2012 elections. The best journalistic accounts are measured and think critically about what campaigns and the consultants that serve them can actually do with this data and online advertising.

A large, underreported area of electoral politics is the organization of new media operations within campaigns. There is a tendency in coverage to talk a lot about the strength of “organization” without actually detailing what that means. The story of the Obama campaign in 2008 and, by all accounts now in 2012, is that new and social media was not a separate, stand-alone area of campaign practice. The point was to avoid what many perceived as one of the pitfalls of the Dean campaign: a national Internet operation that was only tenuously connected to what was taking place on the ground in the states. Obama’s effort in 2008, to an extraordinary degree, integrated different areas of campaign practice and used new media in the service of a large-scale ground operation, which campaigns have increasingly invested in **to compensate** for media fragmentation and oversaturation. The internal operations of campaigns are generally hidden from view, but journalists should always ask the question of whether and how neat new campaign technologies are connected to electoral goals around fundraising, messaging, and votes.

What do all the developments in big data and social media mean for down-ticket races? Here in North Carolina, I’ve already seen local campaigns using social media extensively, perhaps because of its low cost. What role should media (traditional and new) play in covering or critiquing how campaigns use new media?

Local campaigns are vastly different from well-funded presidential efforts. It is true that

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campaigns at all levels, through the infrastructure of parties, have access to much better data on the electorate than they did two decades ago, but this does not mean that local campaigns can mount large-scale turnout operations. For these campaigns, the emphasis is still on retail politicking and coalition building, working through their organized party groups or allies in civil society.

Outside of that, it continues to be paid and earned television media. Social media can, at best, complement these efforts. Social media is about connecting and maintaining ties with supporters, driving fundraising, and trying to get bodies in field offices.

I am not quite sure that journalists should be in the business of critiquing campaign tactics unless they are unethical. Journalists spend much time handicapping elections, providing [what Joan Didion long ago called](#) the undemocratic “Insider Baseball” accounts of politics that serve merely to alienate everyone not in the game. Even more, the uneven professionalization of much of democratic life is what makes many forms of civic expression authentic. The uptake of social media on many campaigns is often the work of young college students or early 20-somethings who believe in a candidate and cause and are willing to try anything to promote it.

The use of new media to document grassroots political efforts can produce volumes of “citizen journalism” that overwhelm individual news consumers and even professional journalists trying to mine the information for stories. How can consumers, critics, and curators of all sorts find their way through the volume to quality? What responsibility do professional journalists have to curate quality work from sources outside their newsrooms?

I think that we have seen some highly successful examples of curation over the past year. Andy Carvin’s work curating tweets for NPR during the Arab Spring is perhaps the paradigmatic case. Journalists with developed expertise finding, deciphering, and vetting information can help the public find what is meaningful and important in a world of information abundance.

But we should also look beyond informed curation. One of the more interesting things I have found in my work on the Obama campaign and now on the efforts around North Carolina’s Amendment One—and that an emerging body of scholarship has also noted—is that much of what we take to be amateur content bubbling up in social media is actually the result of coordinated action by actors with complex motives and organizational affiliations. The [excellent reporting of *The New York Times*](#) around the Trayvon Martin shooting reveals this, as does [the recent incident](#) involving Planned Parenthood and the Komen Foundation. It is not entirely professional communications, and yet it is not simply amateur citizen journalism either. It is temporary, coordinated communicative action when the goals of disparate actors align.

Journalists should be attentive to these processes, and not assume that something “going viral” is a purely organic, uncoordinated process. For example, campaigns routinely host conference calls with bloggers to coordinate messaging, sometimes create content that is designed to look like the work of amateurs, and cultivate online allies to promote content on sites such as Digg and blogs such as Daily Kos. Much of what we take to be the political production of amateurs is not [what it seems](#).

Expectations in Charlotte are that protests like the Occupy movement will have large, loud presences during the Democratic National Convention later this year. Media outlets have the ability to amplify the messages of these new organizations, and new technologies like independent streaming video often

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play a large role. What kind of interplay between new sources and traditional media do you expect in the coverage of such events in North Carolina?

There is an excellent recent book on exactly this subject, Sarah Sobieraj's *Soundbitten*. Sobieraj is rather pessimistic about the potential of civil society groups to contribute in meaningful ways to the professional press agenda. That said, a number of recent pieces by social movement scholars on Occupy have suggested that the movement has been very successful at setting the professional press agenda, in part by providing the rhetorical space for Democratic Party elites to embrace the movement's rhetoric of the 99%.

In terms of the movement's own media, no doubt activists think a lot about how they represent themselves, their message, and the channels they have for this symbolic work. And yet, movements need the professional press for mobilization and validation. Movements also need the professional press to widen the scope of conflict outside of their ideological niches, particularly with regard to the elected officials and interest groups that may share similar policy and strategic goals but are not expressly affiliated with the movements.

Your past work has explored the idea that new social media tools can level the playing field and help create a more participatory democracy. With the increasing effect of big money on campaigns, do you think any media outlets, new or old, have the power to truly level the playing field in 2012 and beyond?

I have actually always been skeptical about the possibility of new and social media tools to level the playing field. Indeed, my colleague Mike Ananny and I actually wrote a piece arguing that this is because, in large part, of financial disparities that enable producers to differentially address publics. We called for a way to subsidize citizen media production through an alternative to copyright, what we call "public domain journalism."

The resource story is still very much the central one. Money helps get message out, although it does not wholly determine the ability of groups to do so. We argue there are still systematic disparities in terms of which voices are heard in the public sphere that often break down on class and race lines, and that new media has not necessarily brought about a qualitatively different conversation about public life or a more inclusive set of participants in this conversation. Even more, with the erosion of the resource base of the professional press, there are fewer intermediaries responsible to the general public able to fulfill the traditional watchdog function.

You've also explored the relationship between new media and collective action. For 2012 in North Carolina and other swing states, what kind of collective action among media do you expect? Do the characteristics of new media facilitate cooperative work? And is there a separation between "new," independent new media and "old" new media like Huffington Post and Daily Kos? Certainly traditional and new media influence each other, but how do you measure and capture influences? How do you determine where ideas and narratives originate?

There is a lot of good work that details the interaction of professional and new media. Generally, the professional press is believed to largely set the agenda for amateur or citizen new media outlets given their resources for original reporting. But there are numerous confounding factors. For one, it is not always clear what terms such as "professional," "traditional," "citizen," or "amateur" even mean. The most trafficked

political blogs, for instance, often explicitly coordinate messaging with elected and party officials. In general, there is research that suggests that elected officials and other bureaucratically credible actors set the agenda for public discourse as a whole. There is also a body of work that suggests that at extraordinary times, citizen journalism and blogs can set the professional agenda. Frankly, we just do not know enough yet about these new media producers to say how they interact with one another and the paths their content travels.

This is something you'll be studying at the Democratic National Convention in Charlotte in early September. How are you planning to do that research? What are you expecting to find?

An interdisciplinary team of researchers at UNC-Chapel Hill's School of Journalism and Mass Communication and the School of Information and Library Science are heading to the convention to conduct work at the media site for non-credentialed producers called **the PPL**. The convention is interesting because there is a shortage of scholarly work on conventions as sites for the production of public discourse. After violence spilled into the streets during the Democratic National Convention in Chicago in 1968, the leaders of both parties decided that the drama of producing a nominee would play out in the voting booth. As a result, scholars have argued that the conventions have become anodyne and tightly scripted media events, denuded of political passion.

And yet, over the last decade networked media have opened the production of political discourse to an incredible range of new social actors, from social movements to ordinary citizens. The 2000 conventions launched the independent activist news platform IndyMedia and raised the question of who counted as a legitimate journalist. In 2004, in recognition of the growing resource base of partisan bloggers and in a challenge to professional news producers, the parties began formally credentialing their most fervent supporters. In 2008, the parties expanded their credentialing further, providing opportunities for a host of non-legacy media to cover the event, including bloggers, advocacy organizations, and new media journalistic outlets.

These dynamics suggest that parties, movements, partisans, and the professional press view conventions as important sites for public political communication. Despite this, very little is understood about how these actors interact to produce political discourse.

Our study will examine how parties, the professional press, and the new actors in the public sphere interact to produce narratives of the 2012 presidential election. We'll be comparing differences in coverage between professional journalism organizations such as *The New York Times* and FOX News; blogs such as Daily Kos and FireDogLake; new media journalistic outlets such as The Huffington Post and Talking Points Memo, and allied Democratic interest groups such as labor unions and advocacy organizations. We will also conduct interviews with these producers to elicit how they understand their new media production and audiences. One of the great things about this research is that we are not sure what we are going to find, but we suspect that interaction among these various outlets, both in terms of content flows and coordination behind the scenes, is a large part of the story.

Although I am pleased by the admission that "we just do not know enough yet about these new media producers to say how they interact with one another and the paths their content travels," I am somewhat stunned that there is no concern over the looming government regulation of these very same new media producers.

I am not very smart and I saw it coming a [decade ago](#).

Further, I am more than a little suspicious that a hunt for coordination will turn up -- coordination. Which strikes me as nothing more than fodder for the speech regulators and a terribly 20th c. concept in any case.

Sometimes there really is no story behind the story -- at least not one worth telling. And especially not one which presumes archaic motives and actors while strengthening antediluvian regulatory impulses.

#1 Posted by **Jeff A. Taylor** on Tue 24 Apr 2012 at 08:46 AM

Hey Jeff,

Thanks for weighing in.

I'm hoping Dan will look beyond just the ideological bloggers like the five who work for the John Locke Foundation in North Carolina and others who blog at Daily Kos. (Though I've seen real reporting on both.)

I was thinking more of the live streamers that took to the streets in New York with Occupy, in hopes of some eventual sponsorship or paid gig, or those who write for CLT Blog in Charlotte for the same purpose (as well as passion, as you mention in your linked post.)

I'd also hope that any government regulations on divulging blogger pay would first look at those who blog for 501(c)3s, which are getting tax breaks and calling themselves nonpartisan. IRS scrutiny on such organizations and their use of the word "nonpartisan" has also put obstacles in the way of new *news* nonprofits aiming to be nonpartisan in the traditional SPJ Ethics Code sense.

Of course, indie bloggers (and reporters!) still exist, and they go to the same conferences and support like-minded friends. That happens across the political spectrum. My hope is that the Kreiss research shows who's doing real *reporting* or coming up with new ideas, rather than just spinning off someone else's work with a great headline or spouting some talking points. We'll see what emerges.

Again, thanks for the comment.

#2 Posted by **Andria Krewson** on Tue 24 Apr 2012 at 09:35 PM

