In Their Own Words: Political Practitioner Accounts of Candidates, Audiences, Affordances, Genres, and Timing in Strategic Social Media Use

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In Their Own Words: Political Practitioner
Accounts of Candidates, Audiences, Affordances, Genres, and Timing in Strategic Social Media Use

DANIEL KREISS, REGINA G. LAWRENCE, and SHANNON C. MCGREGOR

This study inductively develops a new conceptual framework for analyzing strategic campaign communications across different social media platforms through an analysis of candidate social media strategies during the 2016 U.S. presidential election cycle. We conducted a series of open-ended, in-depth qualitative interviews with campaign professionals active during the 2016 presidential cycle. Our analysis revealed that scholars need to account for the ways that campaigns perceive their candidates in addition to the audiences, affordances, and genres of different social media platforms, as well as the timing of the electoral cycle, in order to effectively study strategic social media communication. Our findings reveal that campaigns proceed from perceptions of their candidates’ public personae and comfort with engagement on social media. Campaigns perceive that social media platforms vary according to their audiences, including their demographics and other characteristics; with respect to their affordances, actual and perceived functionalities; the genres of communication perceived to be appropriate to them; and the timing of the electoral cycle, which shapes messaging strategies and the utility of particular platforms. These factors shape how campaigns use social media in the service of their electoral goals. We conclude by developing these findings into an analytic framework for future research, arguing that researchers should refrain from automatically generalizing the results of single-platform studies to “social media” as a whole, and detailing the implications of our findings for future political communication research.

There has been an explosion of social media platforms over the past decade, part of broader changes in our media environment (Chadwick, 2013) that have ushered in a new era of “technology-intensive campaigning” (Kreiss, 2016). Social media platforms are an increasingly prevalent way that citizens receive and share news and information and, as such, the uptake of these platforms in elections is now as essential as the old staple of television advertising. A particular challenge for campaigns is the fact that strategic communications over social media platforms are...
far more complex than the 30-second television spot, which has generally remained
the same over generations of presidential bids.

Consider the fact that social media platforms offer a dizzying and continually chan-
gring array of often subtly different ways for campaigns to display online advertisements to
evoters targeted on the basis of their geographic locations, demographics, likes and dislikes,
and dispositions. Meanwhile, campaigns must produce their own creative content for very
different platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat, which they hope
influences voters and journalists. To be successful at doing so requires not only figuring
out how to take up and use new social media platforms that launch or grow in significance
between election cycles and have different audiences and often very different cultures, but
also navigate comparatively older ones that continually change their basic functionalities
and algorithms. As boyd and Ellison (2007, 210) argued,

The cultures that emerge around SNSs [social networking sites] are varied. Most
sites support the maintenance of pre-existing social networks, but others help
strangers connect based on shared interests, political views, or activities. Some
sites cater to diverse audiences, while others attract people based on common
language or shared racial, sexual, religious, or nationality based identities. Sites
also vary in the extent to which they incorporate new information and commu-
ication tools, such as mobile connectivity, blogging, and photo video/sharing.

Despite boyd and Ellison’s insight nearly a decade ago, to date political communica-
tion researchers have often focused narrowly on Twitter or Facebook, and often logically
generalize their results to the broader concept of “social media.” But it is not at all clear
that we can automatically generalize across election cycles or social media platforms that
have quite different audiences, feature different genres of communication, and have
different functionalities, and as such are of different strategic value to campaigns.
Unlike television, which remained a stable technology for more than 40 years and
anchored the concept of “videostyle” (Kaid & Johnston, 2001), the rapid changes of the
Internet mean we cannot presume continuity even within a site such as Facebook across
election cycles (Karpf, 2012), let alone across newly emerging platforms that compete for
audiences and define their purposes and design their functionalities in various ways.

This article provides an empirical and analytical look at how practitioners understand
social media platforms and use them in service of their electoral goals. Through in-depth
interviews with campaign professionals active during the 2016 presidential cycle, in
addition to the representatives of the social media firms that assisted them, we derive a
conceptual framework that takes an integrated approach to understanding candidates,
audiences, affordances, genres, and the timing of campaign communications. We docu-
ment how practitioners themselves perceive, understand, and approach different social
media platforms in the context of their electoral goals and their candidates, and analyze
commonalities and differences across these platforms. This inductively derived analytical
framework can guide scholars pursuing both organizational studies of how campaigns and
other political actors produce content across social media platforms in line with broader
electoral and communications goals as well those designing codebooks to quantitatively
study social media content and experiments that seek to discover the effects of campaign
communications.

Our fundamental argument is that campaign communication on any single platform
cannot automatically be logically generalized to any other, or social media as a whole. Platforms that are often lumped together under the banner of “social media” are in some
ways alike, and in other ways quite different. Even more, we provide empirical evidence for Jungherr’s (2016b) argument that “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” (p. 374). Overall, this analysis seeks to more fully conceptualize campaign organizations’ use of various social media platforms as fine-grained forms of strategic communication.

Campaign Organizations and Social Media Platforms

There are a number of works that provide general accounts of the adoption of digital and social media tools (e.g., Stromer-Galley, 2014) and examine the comparative uptake of technology by campaigns overall (e.g., Bimber, 2014). Some scholars have explored qualitatively how campaign operatives approach the challenges of communicating with voters in the era of media fragmentation and narrowcasting (Serazio, 2014). Meanwhile, over the past decade a number of other political communication studies have focused on particular social media platforms, especially Facebook (e.g., Larsson, 2016; Williams & Gulati, 2013) and Twitter (e.g., Bekafiyo & McBride, 2013; Bode, Hanna, Yang, & Shah, 2015; Conway, Kenski, & Wang, 2013; Gainous & Wagner, 2014; Gulati & Williams, 2010; Hanna, Sayre, Bode, Yang, & Shah, 2011; Lassen & Brown, 2011; Vergeer, Hermans, & Sams, 2011), the latter undoubtedly because it is comparatively easy to access its data (boyd & Crawford, 2012). These studies at times implicitly generalize their findings to social media as a whole. For example, while offering a detailed analysis of how a number of U.S. campaigns differentially utilized Twitter in 2012, Conway and colleagues (2013) place their study broadly within the context of “use of SNSs” (social networking sites) by candidates.

Other scholars take a different approach. Some studies have closely examined single platforms to understand how their particular features structure how they are used—although not necessarily by election campaigns. Schmidt (2014), for example, argues for understanding Twitter in terms of its specific software features, the non-reciprocal relationships it allows, and the understandings of “how to use” Twitter that have developed among users. Others have focused on how journalists in particular have carved out specific uses (and norms) on Twitter in their political reporting routines (e.g., Lawrence, Molyneux, Coddington, & Holton, 2014), which Parmelee (2014) in part credits to the linking-out affordances of the platform. Meanwhile, studies of politicians’ use of Twitter (see Jungherr, 2016a, for an overview) have focused on explaining their propensity to utilize the platform (e.g., Evans, Cordova, & Sipole, 2014); their use (or non-use) of its specific technical features, such as @messages, retweets, and links; or on the broad categories of content posted to it (e.g., Glassman, Straus, & Shogan, 2010), with some studies inferring campaign strategies from observable patterns in campaign posts (e.g. Graham, Broersma, Hazelhoff, & van ‘t Haar, 2013).

Despite this body of work, few studies provide a way to systematically analyze how campaign communications might differ across various social media platforms. There is little research that examines from an organizational production perspective how campaigns take up platforms in the service of their electoral goals as part of a broader, integrated communications strategy. Scholars who have taken this approach (e.g., Baldwin-Philippi, 2015; Kreiss, 2012; Kreiss, 2016), and an extensive practitioner literature (for a review see Delany, 2016; see also Towner & Dulio, 2012), point to the fact that social media platforms vary significantly in terms of their audiences for campaign communications and the types of content they support and that audiences view as appropriate. As boyd and
Ellison (2007) pointed out a decade ago and as publicly available data also reveal (e.g., Pew Research Center, 2016), social media platforms have different user bases. Therefore, we should expect that campaigns craft different messages for and use social media platforms differently in the context of their electoral goals. To empirically analyze what is the same, and different, about campaigns’ social media use across platforms, and to develop a conceptual framework to guide future empirical work, we sought to hear from practitioners in their own words about their strategic social media communications efforts.

Methods

From June 2016 through February 2017 we conducted interviews with digital and social media directors, or people in similarly relevant positions, about their work on 2016 presidential primary and general election campaigns (see Table 1). These individuals are Christopher Georgia, digital director for Jeb Bush’s 2016 campaign; Chris Maiorana, digital strategist and chief technology officer, and Jordan Powell, deputy campaign manager, for Mike Huckabee’s 2016 campaign; Jack Minor, deputy digital director for Ted Cruz’s 2016 campaign; Vincent Harris, digital director for Rand Paul’s 2016 campaign; Hector Sigala, social media director for the Bernie Sanders 2016 campaign; Caroline McCain, social media director for Marco Rubio’s primary bid; and Matt Compton, deputy digital director for Hillary Clinton’s 2016 general election campaign. In addition, we interviewed Christina Reynolds, Hillary Clinton’s deputy communications director, who worked closely with the digital team particularly around Twitter for reasons we discuss later, and in an entirely off-the-record interview that we used to check the data presented here, we spoke with Teddy Goff, senior digital advisor to Clinton. Despite repeated attempts, we were unable to schedule an on-the-record interview with anyone on the Donald Trump campaign or within the Republican National Committee, which handled much of his campaign’s digital operations. In addition, as part of a larger project that

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Campaign</th>
<th>Interview Date</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Christopher Georgia</td>
<td>Digital director</td>
<td>Jeb Bush</td>
<td>July 13, 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris Maiorana</td>
<td>Digital strategist &amp; chief technology officer</td>
<td>Mike Huckabee</td>
<td>July 5, 2016</td>
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<td>Jordan Powell</td>
<td>Deputy campaign manager</td>
<td>Mike Huckabee</td>
<td>July 12, 2016</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jack Minor</td>
<td>Deputy digital director</td>
<td>Ted Cruz</td>
<td>July 5, 2016</td>
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<td>Vincent Harris</td>
<td>Digital director</td>
<td>Rand Paul</td>
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<td>Hector Sigala</td>
<td>Social media director</td>
<td>Bernie Sanders</td>
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<td>Caroline McCain</td>
<td>Social media director</td>
<td>Marco Rubio</td>
<td>December 21, 2016</td>
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<td>Matt Compton</td>
<td>Deputy digital director</td>
<td>Hillary Clinton</td>
<td>February 13, 2017</td>
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<td>Christina Reynolds</td>
<td>Deputy communications director</td>
<td>Hillary Clinton</td>
<td>February 7, 2017</td>
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<td>Teddy Goff</td>
<td>Senior digital advisor</td>
<td>Hillary Clinton</td>
<td>February 16, 2017</td>
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<tr>
<td>Katie Harbath</td>
<td>Global politics &amp; government outreach director</td>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>January 24, 2017</td>
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analyzes the work of technology companies with candidates, Kreiss conducted a group interview with Facebook political staffers, including global politics and government outreach director Katie Harbath. (We present a relevant portion of a much longer interview here that speaks to candidate strategies. For this other project, see Kreiss & McGregor, 2017). Unless otherwise noted, all interviews were conducted on the record, although participants could declare any statement not for attribution (directly quoted but anonymously sourced), on background (not directly quoted), or off the record (not reported in any way) at their discretion. Interviews lasted for an hour on average. We selected participants based on their roles within social media firms or their digital or social media positions on 2016 primary and general election campaigns drawn from the nonprofit, nonpartisan website Democracy in Action, which compiles staffer information from Federal Election Commission data, press and trade publication reports, and other public and private sources.

Our sample of campaigns gives us marked case variation between comparatively well-resourced and top-tier competitive campaigns (Bush, Clinton, Cruz, Rubio, and Sanders) and those that struggled for resources and attention (Huckabee and Paul). The striking similarities in what these individuals described in terms of their uptake of social media platforms, and their differing understandings of and strategies for producing content across them, allowed us to achieve saturation across these interviews.

We analyzed our data following Luker’s (2008) maxim to simultaneously couple analysis of data with readings of relevant literature in order to inductively develop theoretical concepts and categories. Luker distinguishes her approach from both grounded theory and the extended case method, two paradigmatic approaches in qualitative research, seeking to overcome what she persuasively sees as the shortcomings of each. Grounded theory calls for literature reviews only after data analysis, while Luker argues that dialogue between evidence and existing theory is essential to the process because theory guides what researchers are sensitive to in their analyses. Unlike the extended case method, Luker’s (2008, p. 125) approach is not to start with a theory to be tested, verified, or refined, but to pursue research that has a “logic of discovery” and generates new theory in the context of an existing literature.

To build from Luker’s approach, our interview questions followed the basic premise of asking practitioners about their roles on campaigns, their work with social media and its evolution over the course of the campaign cycle, and explicitly about their approach to each social media platform. We then looked for similarities and differences between their accounts. While we analyzed the data, we developed emergent categories that we then indexed to and developed from various literatures on social media and communication more broadly.

**Findings**

**Candidates**

A number of scholars have analyzed how candidates strategically present themselves to get elected and re-elected. Notably, Fenno (1978) detailed the “homestyle” of members of Congress: how members perceived their constituencies and thought strategically about how to reach and appeal to potential voters and volunteers. Fenno emphasized the personal relationships that incumbents cultivate in their districts. However, in the context of a national presidential election where such personal relationships are impossible, and a 21st-
century media environment, social media becomes a primary way for candidates to introduce themselves to vastly dispersed constituencies and build their support among potential volunteers, donors, and voters. Fenno’s insights remain relevant today, however, in the sense that each candidate’s homestyle is distinctive and rooted in their individual attributes and experiences. Vaccari’s (2010) campaign interviewees, for example, reported that their candidates’ personalities and campaigning skills affected how they employed Internet tools. Moreover, social media allows mediated “personalizing” strategies (McGregor, 2017; McGregor, Lawrence, & Cardona, 2017) that create a sense of spontaneous intimacy with and insights into candidates’ character and lives.

The importance of distinct individual candidates in shaping social media strategies was evident across our interviews. Practitioners said that their social media use proceeded from a sense of their candidate: who they are in terms of their public persona, political biography, policy stances, ideology, temperament, and comfort with engagement on social media. Katie Harbath of Facebook referred to the fit between candidate and social media persona in terms of “authenticity”: “I think the people who have the most success, and this is something we drum into them every time we talk to them. Be authentic, be authentic.” Facebook staffers explicitly stated that candidates who were the most “authentic” did better in terms of boosting their engagement on social media. As Harbath went on to argue, both Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders resonated on Facebook because they were:

very authentic candidates who had a very strong viewpoint of the issues and where they stood and what they wanted to say…. Yeah, I think people are forgiving too, if you’re trying to be authentic, even if you don’t get it perfect…. This is a medium where they can present their message the way they want to, without having to worry about kind of massaging things with the reporter, or trying to shape the story in the way it’s pitched, they can just go directly to their audience with it, and I do think people forgive even if it’s not perfect. So, if you don’t look your best, or it might be endearing even, if you’re kind of sick and you’re still trying to talk to people, like they appreciate you’re putting in the effort. There’s a real human element to it, that even in the nuttiness of a political campaign comes through, which is nice. (personal communication).

Across our interviews, practitioners stated that they sought to use social media in a way that fit with and conveyed the “authentic” voice of their candidates. While Alexander (2010) persuasively makes the point that audiences can never truly discern what is actually an “authentic” versus a contrived persona given the scale of the polity, practitioners routinely spoke about their candidates in terms of authenticity, and stressed the need to fit their own work to the voice of their candidates. For example, different campaigns had fundamentally different understandings of what they could, and should, do on social media given the perceived qualities and biographies of their candidates. For some campaigns, it was about letting candidates be themselves and direct their own messaging on social media given their personal embrace of these platforms. For example, Chris Maiorana described Huckabee’s embrace of social media during this cycle:

He’s savvier than I am—maybe not digitally, but he gets it and sees the value in it. In ’08, he probably didn’t, but by this time, he definitely did…. We could reach 10 to 12 million people a week, according to Facebook, with what we were posting. So, he liked that; he liked it as a way to sort of break into the
conversation with voters. He did everything that came up at the debates, the
debate stuff. Facebook would host this, or Twitter would do this; Governor
Huckabee would participate. He valued it; he talked about it; he had ideas for
it… I was gonna say the funny stuff is his. I’m not particularly funny, but he is
(personal communication).

For other campaigns, it was about crafting a social media presence for candidates in a
way that would fit them. Christopher Georgia, for instance, talked about introducing Jeb
Bush on social media on terms that fit his actual character and biography: “We viewed
social media as a lens through which to show the character traits that we thought
exemplified why he should be president. And so that was everything from showing that
he was a policy nerd and an introvert… getting those points across through pictures and
posts and the small videos that were posted” (personal communication).

This “authentic” approach, interestingly, extended to some candidates eschewing
overtly personal content in favor of policy. Hector Sigala, for instance, described how
during the course of his career Bernie Sanders had always embraced alternative sources of
media as a route around “corporate” media. Sanders had taken to writing his own posts on
Facebook while in the Senate, which helped build his massive social media audiences.
During the campaign, when Sanders was not posting himself, the campaign attempted to
channel his unique voice. Sigala said:

Bernie told us to… always talk about issues, and I don’t ever want to see a
picture of my food or a cat on our social media. So it was always very
straightforward, it was always very much Bernie, it was never about how
witty could we be to get something to go viral, how cute can we be. It was
always about let’s just talk about the issues that Bernie would be talking about.
If Bernie were here in this room right now and he was watching the TV or
reading Twitter or whatever, [his] commentary, we can provide [that] to the
world. So that was always the perspective and that’s across every platform,
very issue oriented, issue focused, and just telling folks exactly the things
Bernie would say at a rally, and it turns out that’s really what really resonated
with folks all over social media (personal communication).

Other practitioners echoed both the involvement of their candidate directly in social
media and the need to channel their authentic voice, including those from the campaigns of
Ted Cruz, Rand Paul, and Marco Rubio. Jack Minor of the Cruz campaign, for instance,
argued that “The most important thing for us rather than something performing well [in
terms of audience metrics] was just that it stayed within our message and within Senator
Cruz’s voice, right, so the candidate is unique in that he is incredibly on message all the
time, and that’s something we wanted our social media presence to uphold” (personal
communication). Minor went on to argue that every time a campaign post went viral it was
“by accident,” an additional marker of authenticity: “reflecting back on it now, it was
really the most personal moments where he showed his personality rather than the politics”
(personal communication). Sometimes this was about the raw reactions of the candidate to
events on the campaign trail, as Minor powerfully described:

[Cruz] is very cognizant of what’s going on, what people want to hear, and
he’s also very intelligent in knowing what will get traction, so, I mean, he
wasn’t the kind to sit down and say “Okay, here’s our long-term strategy in
He definitely trusts the people he hires to know what they can do and do it best, but every now and then he’ll pop his head in and say, “Hey, by the way, I have an idea for a video” or “Put this out” or occasionally just do it on his own. For instance, when [Donald] Trump came out and attacked Heidi [Cruz’s wife], that picture, we were sitting in a meeting talking about how to address it, and all of a sudden we start getting notifications of retweets from our account, and the Senator just picked up his phone and went with it, so he was definitely hands-on very much, and he understands its value I think. He’s always been a grassroots-minded person, and that’s very good with a social media strategy…. (personal communication).

Again, authenticity is a problematic concept because it is performative. Note the tension here, for instance, between Cruz being “very intelligent in knowing what will get traction” and his seemingly gut reaction to Trump’s attacks on his wife. Caroline McCain offers up a different version of the same tension, stating that Marco Rubio had an incredibly compelling personal voice, story, speaking style, and appeal. At the same time, the Rubio team made the decision to craft all social media from Rubio’s account in first-person voice as if the candidate were actually tweeting, even though it was coming from his staff. The campaign was also well aware that some aspects of Rubio the candidate were a political liability, such as his comparative youth, but especially that he looked young (Cruz is only one year older than him). As McCain relates, there is symbolism to the adoption of particular social platforms themselves:

[…] because he has boyish looks. That was one of the things he got knocked for initially was, “Is he actually ready? He looks young. Is he ready and man enough for the job?” And so we really shied away from doing some things that I think other candidates could do, Snapchat for instance. Snapchat, super trendy, super cool, it’s what all the young people do. It’s literally all young people are on Snapchat. We didn’t want to continue to add to the perception that Marco is really young and inexperienced. Whereas someone like Jeb could and did do Snapchat and it kind of comes across as, the vibe in my opinion was, “I’m trying to be a cool dad. Oh look, I’m hip. I can do this.” We didn’t want to do that with Marco. We wanted a measure of seriousness (personal communication).

Audiences

As McCain’s observations make clear, practitioners use social media to create and disseminate symbolic content that introduces candidates to voters and performs their political personas. McCain also reveals practitioners’ perceptions, and the reality of the fact, that social media platforms have very different audiences. Indeed, all the practitioners in this study stated that their campaigns used different platforms in different ways to appeal to (and symbolically evoke) different audiences. Practitioners relied on their familiarity with these platforms and trade publications to know their audiences, and also used the analytics data that social media companies made available to them. Political scientist Eitan Hersh developed a “perceived voter model” in his research on how campaigns utilize voter file data to know and target the electorate, which includes a mix of public, political, and commercial sources of data (2015). In the context of digital campaigning, this includes data from social media firms. Facebook makes categories of
its user data available to campaigns, and allows them to collect and make use of behavioral trace data about users, expanding the repertoire of data upon which to base decision-making and communicative action, which Baldwin-Philippi (2015) and Karpf (2016) have shown shapes strategic digital communications.

For example, all of the practitioners interviewed cited that Facebook had the widest audience reach compared to other social media platforms. Sigala, for instance, likened Facebook to America, mapping onto the actual user base of this platform according to industry statistics: “The majority of Americans are on Facebook, so it was our biggest platform, our most diverse one. We could really try to get young Latinos, to older African-Americans of the South, to blue-collar workers in the Midwest. Really, the audience was everyone” (personal communication). Practitioners viewed Facebook as having the broadest demographics, and as such it was universally viewed as important, especially in contrast to Instagram and Snapchat, both of which they viewed as appealing primarily to younger (and therefore less electorally valuable) audiences. As Jordan Powell, deputy campaign manager for Huckabee, stated, “Facebook is obviously the 800-pound gorilla of social platforms, and it’s probably the quote/unquote oldest, not meaning how long it’s been around, but just demographically. Facebook is going to provide you probably the broadest range of age groups that you can find” (personal communication).

The broad potential reach of Facebook meant that candidates could use it for many different purposes, including both generalized and targeted messages and online advertising designed to identify and persuade new supporters. As McCain summarized:

I think Facebook was the most important for us. Facebook was by far our largest channel. Facebook is the least insular. I think in DC a lot of people think Twitter is so important. Twitter was important, Donald Trump made it important. It still is not as big as Facebook. It’s not; there’s clearly industry data to speak to that. Facebook was our biggest source of traffic. It was our biggest source of engagement and so if we ever had something, Facebook always came first in my mind in terms of where to go with something. It was our most diverse audience. It was, I think, on our Facebook page we actually had more men than we did women, which was unusual. Typically that’s reversed. We had a really great cross-section in terms of age and slightly more men than women (personal communication).

Practitioners also spoke of the “versatility” of Facebook because it supported targeted communications to groups of interest to these campaigns. As Georgia, of the Bush campaign, detailed, “So we were able to use Facebook to great success to grow the support and the e-mail list of the campaign and the donor files of the campaign. The ads were an important role there. It was also a good opportunity for the persuasion side of it” (personal communication). In particular, practitioners pointed to the ways they could use the platform to collect valuable data about supporters, which they could then leverage for the purposes of delivering targeted advertising to similar audiences. As Maiorana, of the Huckabee campaign, detailed, “Facebook is the most important for us. I viewed Facebook as a place to build, sort of enhance our data. With some of the interaction that we saw, we could allow ‘look-alike’ [similar] audiences and advertise to them, message to them, fundraise from them” (personal communication).

As McCain highlighted earlier, interview subjects also discussed the importance of Twitter, but for reaching very different audiences. In line with prior research (Kreiss, 2014), practitioners cited that Twitter helped these campaigns set the agendas and shape
the frames of journalists and influence campaign coverage in legacy media. Clinton’s Christina Reynolds stated, “For us, Twitter could control a news cycle in a way that no other social media could… that’s what reporters were reading, that’s what we cared about” (personal communication). This primary journalistic audience was the reason why Reynolds, a communications staffer, worked closely with the digital team around this specific platform and had little to do with others such as Facebook. Sanders’s Sigala, meanwhile, related the following: “We’ve got upwards of two million followers on Twitter, but really our highest engages there are going to be journalists…. We tweeted something out, and 10 minutes later it’s on TV” (personal communication). Georgia, Bush’s digital director, said of Twitter, “Overall, it was a tool for communicating where we were to reporters… rather than issuing a written statement, we would often respond with tweets… Twitter, more so than anything, [was] a direct collaboration between [the] Communications Department and the Digital Department” (personal communication). Scholars have documented the extent to which journalists congregate on Twitter, particularly during elections (Lawrence, Molyneux, Coddington, & Holton, 2014), including around media events such as debates (Coddington, Molyneux, & Lawrence, 2014). Journalists use Twitter to construct campaign narratives (Mourão, 2015), and our interviews suggest that campaigns take advantage of the journalistic audiences that Twitter delivers in the attempt to intervene in this narrative construction.

The other important aspect of Twitter lay in reaching audiences that were “second screening” (Gil de Zúñiga, Garcia-Perdomo, & McGregor, 2015; Vaccari, Chadwick, & O’Loughlin, 2015) live events. Nearly all of the campaigns noted that Twitter was the platform that audiences turned to in order to witness reactions to and conversation around live events such as the conventions and debates. As Jordan Powell of the Huckabee campaign stated, “Twitter played a role for news events of the day…. And so we leveraged Twitter for the Republican debates, as well as the Democrat debates, as well as press, you know, de facto press releases, responding to press….” (personal communication).

Powell also emphasized that he paid close attention to data provided by the analytics services offered by these platforms and adjusted his communicative practices accordingly, which was echoed across the interviews. Practitioners understood platform audiences through statistics that the advertising teams of these social media firms produced about their users, the data that campaigns were able to generate through the analytics platforms that social media companies provided, social media market research and studies published by trade outlets, and practitioners’ own interpretative understanding of interactions and engagement on these platforms. These campaigns all reported utilizing data provided by platforms and digital advertisers about potential audiences, tracking the engagement around their content such as donations and e-mail list sign-ups, running experimental tests to see what content performed best, reading comments, watching one another, and working to actively interpret optimal uses of these platforms.

For example, all of the practitioners in this study described accessing various forms of social media data to help them better understand their audiences across different platforms, the performance of their content, and the progress they were making toward their goals. These data were always imperfect and these firms differentially made data available to the campaigns based on privacy as well as other concerns, which in turn shaped the ways that campaigns understood their audiences and produced messages tailored for specific platforms. Illustrating all of these dynamics, in a passage worth quoting at length, Sigala stated the following:
So, on top of the normal analytics we got from each platform, we also used this other service called Quintly and it gives you a ton of every single piece of raw data you could think of and puts it into ugly little graphs. But it just gave you every little thing that you could possibly scrape off of Facebook or Twitter or Instagram or YouTube… So, if you wanna feel like you have post types, we would be able to see what type of posts across Bernie, Hillary, O’Malley, Trump, Bush, Rubio, and Rand Paul—across Facebook, what would we see—we would see how many likes, views, hits every day, okay? But what’s their engagement every single day? Based on posts, what’s their engagement? Based on likes, what’s their engagement rate? And then we try to find trends. Why is it that Ted Cruz got a higher engagement rate this week, and then we find, “Oh, it’s because he diversified his post type more.” So, you could say that he posted four photos, five links, 10 videos and two status updates. And it turns out that the two status updates did a lot better than everything else, because he wasn’t oversaturating his newsfeed with just one type of post…. I, personally, would spend, on behalf of the campaign, about an hour to two hours every night between 11 p.m. to 1 a.m., just looking at how different posts and different platforms did and trying to test things after that.

And it wasn’t just other campaigns; we were tracking other organizations as well and other grassroots groups…. So, we’d also go back to these pages and see what post they were posting and whether it really was based on this big algorithm and gaming it or whether it was really just having the right message at the right time. And we found out it really was a mixture of everything. One, there are particular lines that Bernie said. For example, women should have the right to control their bodies; the government shouldn’t be able to control. Or anyone who works 40 hours a week should not be living in poverty. Freedom of speech does not mean the freedom to buy elections. These lines were lines that, whenever you put them out, they would just do really, really well, ’cause they’re just snippets that folks really like…. And we found that both from our own testing and things that we saw from other cases across different social media platforms. So, yeah, we learned a lot from a lot of different accounts, and we still are. (personal communication)

Based on these varying sources of data, practitioners also saw Instagram and Snapchat as primarily a way to reach younger audiences seeking backstage and behind-the-scenes looks at candidates and life on the campaign trail. Practitioners from all of these campaigns noted that these two platforms were more oriented toward youths and, as such, were also seen as the purview of better-resourced campaigns that could afford to produce rich content for them. As Chris Maiorana of the Huckabee campaign described in the context of Instagram, a resource-strapped campaign had to prioritize, and for them Facebook and Twitter were more important platforms from an electoral strategy perspective:

Instagram was something that I was really interested in [sighs], but unfortunately, it was the third rung, the bottom rung, on the ladder in terms of priorities for us. We posted, I guess. But we tried to do it… I think we posted about 200 and something times. We had no followers or no account going into the campaign…. But I was interested in it, just because I’ve read a couple of
stories about how explosive the growth can be, who the audience is, and I wanted to sort of tap into that for Governor Huckabee, but again, it was sort of number three on the list (personal communication).

**Affordances**

Another theme to emerge inductively from these accounts is how the evolving features of these platforms shaped their use by campaigns. Georgia, of the Bush campaign, argued that at the beginning of the cycle Instagram was limited in its utility for campaigns by the fact that it did not support direct outside links, which point supporters to candidate websites, donation pages, or other social media sites:

So, I mean, Instagram, you can’t even direct link to/from—or at least at the time you couldn’t…. But you could paste a link in there but an individual would have to copy it and paste it in their browser to go to it rather than click on it just to go to it. So Instagram… wasn’t the direct marketing side of this… (personal communication).

Georgia reveals the importance of what scholars have identified as the “affordances” of technologies. The concept of affordances relates to what various platforms are actually capable of doing and perceptions of what they enable, along with the actual practices that emerge as people interact with platforms. Technological practices are bounded by people’s perceptions of what technologies can do, material or digital features that literally structure what can be done with them, and behaviors that emerge and evolve in relation to technologies (Evans, Pearce, Vitak, & Treem, 2017; Nagy & Neff, 2015). In a battle for campaign resources, campaigns had to prioritize their social media strategies based on the perceived electoral value of different platforms, which related not only to audiences but also the types of communication that practitioners believed they supported. Facebook, for example, continually changed its algorithm, thus shaping the visibility of content. As Sigala stated, “The thing with Facebook is it’s changing, and it changes all the time, so something that worked this month would completely just fail next month, and you’d have to find what the new thing is and just keep testing” (personal communication). Meanwhile, as Georgia argued, the affordances of Instagram and Snapchat limited their electoral value because they did not easily support outside links and the social sharing of content. As McCain noted:

[on] Snapchat there’s literally no way to convert someone from Snapchat because it’s anonymous. It’s one way, it’s anonymous. When at the end of the day our goals are getting votes and getting dollars, Snapchat wasn’t somewhere that we could invest in fully because we didn’t know what kind of return we were getting…. (personal communication).

In other words, design interacts with and affects how and whether content reaches audiences, and what those audiences can ultimately do in a digital environment. Practitioners cited that while Instagram had high engagement rates (in terms of likes and comments) for campaigns, in lacking the widespread ability (at the time) to host outside links during much of the cycle it was not a medium that could easily and directly convert that engagement into electoral resources. Snapchat’s affordances also offered a clear challenge to practitioners for similar reasons, particularly when compared with Facebook.
Meanwhile, during the 2016 cycle Twitter favored content displayed chronologically, as opposed to being premised on an algorithm that filtered content based on what people interact with over time, a core feature of Facebook. This meant that when a campaign posted something to Twitter, everyone following that campaign could in theory see it, in contrast to Facebook posts. Campaigns leveraged this affordance of Twitter to test message effectiveness. Sigala described the differences between Facebook and Twitter in terms of their designed functionalities:

If we put something out on Twitter it’s going to be seen by however many people are online at that time in real time. It’s not going to get devalued based on what type of tweets we put out. It’s just going to do well based on who’s online and how many people actually like the comments or the tweet. On Facebook you’ve got a whole different monster there because you’re getting devalued on so many different levels; like we have four million followers that like us on Facebook. If you put a post out, it’s not going to get four million views right away. Facebook is going to show it to a small percentage of our base, and based on how that small percentage interacts with our post, it will spread more to both our followers and their followers based on how many people shared or liked something that shows up on their friend’s feed. So we played with that a lot as well (personal communication).

The fact—and especially the frustration—of continual platform changes was a common sentiment across our interviews. Similarly, as Chris Maiorana of the Huckabee campaign noted, “Campaigns are really dependent upon the platforms in some ways. It’s too dependent. And they become even more important for small campaigns” (personal communication). Even still, although space prevents us from addressing it in greater depth here, practitioners routinely described leveraging the affordances and the audiences of one platform (such as Facebook) to promote content on another (such as Twitter). A common example was the ease of organizing groups on Facebook that could then be mobilized to shape communication on other platforms. McCain, for instance, talked about how the Rubio campaign’s digital community manager would organize activists on Facebook to promote content on Twitter. For his part, Sigala spoke of utilizing Sanders’s extensive Reddit following to promote content on Facebook and Twitter.

**Genres**

Practitioners universally referred to the fact that different social media platforms seemed to feature different types of communication that were deemed appropriate among their particular audiences. One way to conceptualize this is through the lens of “genre,” although the practitioners themselves did not use this word. If affordances relate to real and perceived functionalities of what platforms do, then genres define what a platform is for. Genres are shared social conventions that structure discourse and enable people to communicate. While the concept of “genre” is expansive and contested (see Freedman & Medway, 2003), broadly they “are part of the way that humans give shape to social activity” (Bazerman, 2004, p. 317), and lend form to both social performances and their reception. Similar to the ways that the material features of newspapers shaped, but did not determine, the genre of journalism Bazerman, (2004), social media genres are shaped by the affordances of platforms through the technical features that encourage and help give
rise to particular conventions in terms of content and expression, as well as norms in terms of how to use these sites.

That said, genres are not equivalent to or wholly determined by affordances, and should be analyzed separate and apart from them. Genres are fundamentally social conventions that take shape over time in a material or digital context to help social actors coordinate their communication by establishing patterns for discourse that apply to particular situations and settings. Through their interactions with others on different social media platforms, and use of them, actors, including our interview subjects, become familiar with the “patterned, typical, and therefore intelligible” (Bazerman, 2004, 311) ways of communicating that come to define them. This makes actors mutually recognizable and intelligible to one another. As Lomborg (2011, p. 26) argues, social media genres are a “tacit contract or a conventional relationship among producer, text, and recipient, which ensures mutual understanding in the communication process.”

To provide an example, McCain of the Rubio campaign talked about producing content that was “native” to the platforms they were using, such as “using cheeky emojis and phrases and things that were very much in the lingo that particular week with millennials” (personal communication). McCain also noted that “we were most successful at Instagram when we stuck to Instagram’s original mission and it being great photos and storytelling” (personal communication). McCain, echoing other practitioners, is here citing the ways that communication on social media can look the same across different platforms (i.e., millennial lingo), and yet different (i.e., Instagram’s emphasis on “photos and storytelling”). McCain captures a dynamic that all practitioners cited, namely their perception that different platforms entailed different audience expectations for content and different conventions that individuals, brands, and candidates followed.

Indeed, the idea of “genre” applies to campaign communication via social media in two ways. First, practitioners perceived there being a genre of social media communication that applied across these different social media platforms, which some scholars (Myers & Hamilton, 2015) have also suggested. For example, even for comparatively well-known candidates such as Jeb Bush, campaigns saw social media as a means through which to “humanize” or personally “introduce” their candidates to the public given the emphasis of social media on personal disclosure (McGregor et al., 2017), “digital intimacy” (Thompson, 2008), and “authenticity” (Marwick & boyd, 2010; McGregor et al., 2017). As Georgia, digital director for the Bush campaign, stated, “Our initial goal there was to introduce people to who Jeb was, because getting to know a candidate is very difficult. They’re constantly on the road. It’s very hard to get face-to-face time with them in a meeting or when you would actually as a voter get to understand who they are.” (personal communication). Powell, deputy campaign manager of the Huckabee campaign, argued, “Ultimately, it all starts with: hey, this is who Governor Huckabee is, and this is what he’s doing today…. those things are very humanizing to a political candidate. So, it’s not [that] we contrive these things to humanize him. This is who he is. We should let people know that so the only thing they don’t see about him is some clip on ‘Morning Joe’…. ” (personal communication).

Indeed, campaigns used social media in the attempt to provide “unfiltered” views of their candidates, while portraying particular characteristics of candidates to round out their images in relation to mainstream media coverage. And, they did so because they perceived that social media audiences expected personal disclosure. Sigala described the Sanders social media effort:
Yeah, we do take a lot more intimate approach and a more Bernie approach. We try to make as much as if Bernie were posting himself. And you’ll find this across different celebrities as well…. They have the best social media platforms, because they themselves do it non-stop, and that’s what works out best. People don’t wanna follow a brand; they don’t wanna follow a company; they wanna follow a person. If they wanted to learn more about your company or about what’s on your website, then they would just go to your website, but they wanna have this kind of conversation with you… making it more personal. Rather than what had been a staff-driven approach, this was Bernie-driven, his voice. Most of our stuff is in first person, whereas every other campaign is doing things in third person as a digital team…. And that’s what we do: We did everything as Bernie. And that was the big difference between, not just the Clinton campaign, but every other campaign (personal communication).

As noted earlier, the Rubio campaign also adopted a first-person voice strategy. That said, the broad idea that social media audiences were looking for a personal lens onto these candidates was universally cited by these practitioners. The genre was so well-defined in these practitioners’ minds that they felt tensions in trying to balance the perceived demand for authenticity across social media with the strategic exigencies of their electoral operation. Vincent Harris, the digital director of the Paul campaign, argued the following:

Very rarely does a candidate post themselves directly on social media. It’s normally run through staff, so from an authenticity perspective, one thing that we wanted to be sure for Senator Paul—I mean, certainly voters understand when something’s scripted and vague and whatever and when you look at Mr. Trump, for example, I think one thing that he did very well is the continued authenticity on social media. You can tell it’s not very scripted. There’s not a lot of, you know, pretty graphics and stuff like that going along with what’s going on, so I think that for Senator Paul, we were cognizant of the fact that he wanted to be authentic, but we also wanted to generate content that people wanted to share, and, you know, that’s really what social media’s about; it’s engaging, it’s about reach and certainly authenticity’s a part of that (personal communication).

Second, and at the same time, practitioners also perceived that different social media platforms feature different genres of communication that audiences expect on them. As noted earlier, in line with previous research (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2015; Vaccari et al., 2015), campaigns generally saw Twitter as a venue for breaking news, real-time discussion, and second-screening media events, given that the site is populated by journalists, political elites, and highly engaged partisans. This meant that for campaigns Twitter was the vehicle for in-the-moment public statements that would get reported on by the press as official statements. As Reynolds argues, this has happened to such an extent that:

Up until very recently, I think, only certain people spoke for the campaign. If you didn’t speak for the campaign, then you didn’t talk to a reporter as if it was a quote. Twitter has changed that…. One of our junior press staffers tweets something or one of our junior non-press staffers tweets something, and that becomes the Clinton campaign’s statement (personal communication).
This stands in stark contrast with the practices of campaigns on other platforms, such as Snapchat and Instagram, which as McCain noted earlier have audiences that are more “millennial” and expect photos and storytelling, not official campaign statements. Reflecting both the genre expectations of Instagram and Snapchat, and the campaigns’ strategic assessment of those platforms’ electoral value, most digital directors we spoke to indicated that so-called body men, lower-level staffers who travel with the candidate, took photos and videos for and posted to Instagram and Snapchat. These staffers worked to capture up-close footage to offer users of those platforms behind-the-scenes and intimate looks at the campaign trail. As Sigala related, “We would have the body men do videos of Bernie behind the scene… videos of him on his tour bus listening to music or him talking to private crews before a big rally, and then him doing direct-to-cameras almost every single day to folks on his Snapchat” (personal communication). This stood in marked contrast to Twitter content, which, as noted earlier, was produced by more specialized practitioners who worked closely with both the communications and digital departments.

Sigala also said that the campaign shifted its “issue-first” social media policy to adapt to the perceived more personal genre of communication that Instagram audiences expected. To do so, Sigala cited that they labeled personal or intimate images with policy-oriented captions, such as a “picture of [Bernie] with his grandkids to talk about ‘I have seven grandchildren and I’ll be damned if I don’t leave them a habitable planet.’” (personal communication). Other campaigns echoed the idea that audiences expect personalized communication on Instagram. Jack Minor of the Cruz campaign stated, “…speaking for the Capitalize Senator’s [Instagram] account specifically, it again was his personal moments, like after winning Iowa or a picture of his family on the tour bus. Stuff like that is what did best” (personal communication).

**Timing**

Finally, our interviews revealed that the ways campaigns used various social media platforms was a function of the timing of the electoral cycle. Practitioners raised the issue of timing as the backdrop to all of their work on their respective campaigns, which can be seen in the interview data around the importance of debates and other media events that punctuate life on the campaign trail. But the interviews also revealed how electoral time shapes social media use more explicitly, in a number of important ways.

For one, practitioners often spoke of scrambling to staff up, develop organizational processes, discern their path to electoral victory, and define the candidate’s message and introduce the candidate to voters at the beginning of a campaign. For example, Christina Reynolds spoke about her early work on the Clinton campaign in terms of the struggle to coordinate the campaign’s various messages across different departments and mediums to achieve consistency:

I worked with our digital team and our policy team and our research team on how do we get things approved, or how do we make sure that everything that goes out is seen by these four departments, because it all matters. We had silly little things…. The policy team could kill me, but we stopped saying “equal pay for equal work.” We talked about “equal pay for women.” That’s a small turn of phrase, but when you’ve got people pushing that out, the policy team was like, “No, we want to use the same language she’s using.” Things like that. There are small nuances.
Also, we wanted to make sure that everyone sort of knew what was going out and had a better sense of it. So we set up more systems. Sometimes they got in the way. I do think that we slowed down some social media in probably an incredibly frustrating way for them, and frustrating for us sometimes (personal communication).

In this small shift over messaging, Reynolds reveals all of the back-end planning that goes into strategic communications work on campaigns and how an effort to reach a core constituency (women) in direct language comes together. What is often under-appreciated in the political communication literature is the degree that campaigns struggle to coordinate messages about policies across departments, mediums, and candidate speeches, particularly early in an election cycle. And, Reynolds also highlights how social media use is shaped by the organizational processes of campaigns, especially the ability to respond quickly to events in the moment on social media, especially Twitter (see Kreiss, 2014).

As noted earlier, before voting starts, practitioners cited that their work was often about introducing their candidates and the policies they were espousing to the audiences they needed to mobilize for strategic electoral reasons. Georgia, of the Bush campaign, for instance, argued the following:

Yeah, so we had a long-term arc that we were moving through. We had a plan of when policy was gonna release various rollouts and, for a large part of the fall, we were focused on pushing the policy pieces of the campaign. So we would sit down and we would get the content ahead of time and then we would have a collective brainstorm with the rest of the content team…. “Here’s the video content that’s gonna reinforce this message. Here’s the display content that’s gonna reinforce this message. Here are the tweets that are gonna reinforce this,” and we’d come up with this holistic package that would deploy around this initiative…. (personal communication).

That campaigns have a temporal logic, communications are often planned in advance, and staffers have a holistic messaging strategy that proceeds in time should not be surprising, even if the empirical literature on digital political communication rarely accounts for time. Extensive studies of campaigns (see, for example, Kreiss, 2014; McKenna & Han, 2014; Pew Research Center, 2015) have revealed that political communication practices change during distinct periods of a cycle. Campaigns launch and initially focus on things such as introducing their candidates, defining their policy positions, and securing party support, all while engaging in fundraising (especially around Federal Election Commission deadlines) and recruiting volunteers to do things such as registering voters (also according to different state deadlines and laws about registration). Fundraising is particularly important early on for campaigns struggling to demonstrate the viability of their candidates for the press and in the minds of party elites and likely primary goers. Maiorana described his early struggle of being a small campaign that needed to raise money to prove Huckabee’s viability and, in turn, hire more staff: “I mean, all campaigns are measured by how much they raise, unfortunately. And so that’s a big stat right at the top….“ (personal communication).

Many of these practitioners cited that social media platforms took on greater or lesser strategic importance depending on the timing of the electoral cycle. While Facebook could be leveraged as a donation tool, which was always relevant to campaigns, as detailed
earlier Twitter was the key medium for moments during the campaign when there was breaking news and debates or other media events such as conventions and vice presidential picks. At the same time, staffers also cited plotting their social media strategies across platforms in the context of key moments during the campaign, while also striving to have the flexibility to change gears when the moment necessitated staying current with the news cycle. As Compton of the Hillary Clinton campaign describes:

We took planning seriously and we tried to be over-prepared for any moment that we could see coming. And I’ll offer one example, which is the rollout of our nominee for vice president and our rollout for Donald Trump’s nominee for vice president. We… sort of prepared, branding, assets and, you know, a whole range of sample content around each of those candidates so that we could be ready, no matter who Hillary picked to be her running mate. We had a longer list of candidate[s] for who Donald Trump would pick to be his running mate and we were equally prepared. And we were ready to go the moment that either announcement was made…. The same thing around, each convention, the same thing around every debate. Any time we could be prepared for a moment, we took that seriously….

Plus we always allowed, you know, ourselves the understanding that the plan can change. That, you know, there could be a moment that we had to scrap our plan to respond to and sort of arrange ourselves so that we were always planned and ready for whatever was coming but have the flexibility to change gears when something that we didn’t anticipate also happened. And so it, you know, that certainly meant that we produced things that we never used. It certainly meant that there’s a lot of great, like Chris Christie for Vice President content that got drafted and edited and approved that never saw the light of day…. (personal communication).

Meanwhile, in the period during early voting and in the run-up to Election Day, these campaigns focused on getting out the vote. McCain summed up how digital fit within the Rubio campaign’s broader communication efforts, and how the timing of the campaign mattered:

We tried to complement the communication strategy. Worked closely with them. Messaging was a big part of it. Speaking to breaking news and important events was a part of it…. [W]hen it came time for voting, starting in January a lot of stuff started to shift to actually turning out voters. Continuing on messaging. Getting information to the right people about early voting and volunteering and what-not (personal communication).

Thus, the timing of the election and its context shapes the audiences campaigns hope to reach as the campaign progresses—and the specific platforms they use to reach them. Sigala, for example, described the Sanders campaign’s social media efforts after the Iowa primaries in terms of broadening the candidate’s base beyond millennials:

We weren’t trying to keep them [millenials] around; we were trying to get the new audiences. So, if we weren’t doing it well—we did well in Iowa, right? And then, we moved to Nevada, a much more Hispanic community, so we tried to do more posts and more bilingual posts. So, it wasn’t that we were
trying to keep the base that we had; we were trying to expand bases. Same thing with the African-American community in South Carolina, and just as we kinda progressed across America, we changed things. So, as we went to North Dakota and South Dakota, we emphasized more of the Native American community. This was the question, “What demographic should we be targeting next or put a bigger emphasis on?” (personal communication).

Discussion

Our in-depth interviews with campaign practitioners reveal that campaigns assess the strategic value of and produce content for social media based on their particular candidates and various platforms’ different audiences, affordances (platforms’ technical capacities and the types of communication and functionalities campaigns believe platforms support), genres (conventions and norms) of communication that have developed among users of each platform, as well as the timing of the campaign cycle.

These insights offer a portable conceptual framework that, we believe, can guide further empirical analysis, particularly in the context of quantitative content analysis and experiments. We learned that campaign workers’ perceptions of who their candidate is in terms of demographic characteristics and public persona shape the content campaigns produce for social media and even their very adoption of particular platforms. And we confirmed, echoing what is also now well-documented in social media market research, that campaigns perceive different platforms to have different user bases—giving rise to different “imagined audiences” (Marwick & boyd, 2010) for content—which in turn conditions their use of these platforms—such as practitioners utilizing Twitter to speak in real time to journalists, versus the more expansive audiences but less timely reach of Facebook. As is clear from the discussion in this article, practitioners seek to understand their audiences and the performance of their social media content through data available across various Web properties, including the analytics services offered by social media platforms.

As our interviews also revealed, campaigns place different electoral valuations on social media platforms depending on their affordances, and this is in part premised on the resources, strategies, and electoral goals practitioners have. Considering affordances allows for the possibility of variation between organizations (i.e., staffers might not all perceive technologies being able to be used for the same things in the same ways), and across social media platforms given that they facilitate different types of communication practices (Evans et al., 2017; Treem & Leonardi, 2013). For example, our analysis revealed that campaigns use social media platforms differently depending on the material (or digital) characteristics of various platforms that provide differential opportunities for and constraints on communicative practice. Moreover, these functionalities are ever changing: new services and features arise and algorithms that select content and shape distribution and attention continually change. For campaigns as for researchers, using and analyzing social media is “often very context-and time-specific” (Lomborg, 2013; see also Gillespie, 2015; Nagy & Neff, 2015).

With respect to genres, campaigns perceive genres of communication across social media as a whole—particularly the personalized (McGregor et al., 2017; van Aelst, Sheafer, & Stanyer, 2011) and intimized (Stanyer, 2013) content common to these platforms (Myers & Hamilton, 2015)—as well as specific communicative norms and conventions that have arisen on different platforms based on how users use them and the types of communication they support and encourage (Lomborg, 2011). As Papacharissi (2015, p. 1)
has argued, each social media platform “invites particular social behaviors, its own form of sociality.” As our analysis reveals, campaign practitioners perceive certain genres being unique to various social media platforms—and craft messages to conform to those genres. Perhaps the way to recognize that a genre is established lies in the fact that users know when someone violates it. As we detail, practitioners perceive that these expectations are at work for campaigns, and they must navigate the line between producing content that conveys the personal qualities and authenticity of candidates on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, even as communications are strategic, instrumental, and explicitly organizational.

Finally, timing within the campaign season matters. The political communication literature has long struggled with temporality (Ryfe, 2001), with many studies proceeding as if they take place in a generalized present. For scholars seeking to perform things such as content analyses, it is necessary to account for the timing of the campaign in order to discern or make sense of practitioners’ strategic goals.

Our framework implies a basic point: that the findings relating to political communication on any one platform are not automatically logically generalizable to any other, or to social media as a whole. To date, much of the political communication literature has been built around the assumptions that social media platforms are, fundamentally, like one another enough to be categorized through the construct of “social media” and that social media platforms can be studied in isolation, separate and apart from campaigns’ broader communication strategies. This does not mean that single-platform studies are useless or that there are no continuities in strategic campaign communications across social media platforms. In our interviews, campaigns reported that they used all these platforms, for instance, to introduce and humanize their candidates for the public. But this looked fundamentally different on Twitter than on Instagram. Researchers need to be careful about generalizing from one platform to another or to all social media, in line with how campaigns actually approach these platforms and their goals for them.

Our analysis is, of course, not without limitations. Our interview subjects spoke primarily of their work in the U.S. 2016 presidential campaign, yet their professional knowledge and strategies draw on work with multiple campaigns over the past decade or more. While we were not able to obtain an interview with someone from the Trump campaign, we are confident that our broad analysis of candidates, audiences, affordances, genres, and timing applies to the Trump case as well. Although campaigns in a multitude of democracies take to social media as part of their communication strategy (see, for example, Vaccari, 2013), generalization beyond the unique U.S. context may be limited.

Based on our analysis, we suggest necessary innovations in various research methodologies. For example, when performing content analysis of campaign communications on social media, codebooks that do not take account of the candidates, audiences, affordances, and genres of communication on the platforms and the differences between them, as well as the time period of the campaign, may fundamentally miss (or misinterpret) much of how campaigns actually use them. Target audiences and communicative genres differ on these platforms, and as such so do communications designed to reach and appeal to users of particular platforms. Affordances differ as well, which means that candidates will generate different types of content to strategically take advantage of different platforms’ perceived capabilities—for example, the image/text affordance of Instagram, versus the ways that Twitter supports dual screening and running experimental trials to measure engagement, versus the ways that Facebook supports broad list-building and organizing. Finally, it is also clear that campaign communication on social media is contextualized within a broader set of strategies. Campaigns adopt different platforms as
part of their broader goals depending on the timing of the campaign, and as such researchers need to be sensitive to strategies as a whole. Given this, and the ways that social media change over time (see Yang & Clark, 2015), as a concept “social media” is simply too broad—papering over significant differences in human communicative practices that exist between platforms, such as the divergent ways that users choose to share their lives upon them (Bright, 2016).

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Notes

1. Facebook, and other technology firms, have self-regulated privacy considerations with respect to the use of their users’ data. As such, campaigns cannot target known, individual citizens on Facebook with appeals as directly as they could through other mediums such as direct mail. Instead they rely on third parties to match names from the voter file to users and receive anonymized data back on the performance of their ads. They can also target based on demographics or shared Facebook usage characteristics. As such, campaigns always know their audiences imperfectly. For a full discussion, see Kreiss (2016).

2. It should be noted that in February 2016, Twitter gradually rolled out a non-chronological (algorithmically driven) timeline, which, over several iterations, stands currently as an opt-in feature (see https://support.twitter.com/articles/164083). As this feature continues to develop, scholars (and practitioners) should note that users might not uniformly have a chronological timeline as their Twitter setting.

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