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# **Australian Political Advertising Design: The use and effectiveness of new digital and social media in the construction of electoral campaigns.**

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## **Abstract**

Political campaigns' use of print, radio and television media is well understood within the Australian context but less clear is the effectiveness of the new digital social media in the construction of political advertising campaigns. Using data gathered in South-East Queensland during the 2012 cycle of State and Local Government elections, this paper studies how design elements contribute to the communication of political party campaign strategies. In particular, using emerging forms of digital analysis including geo-tagging and data-mining, this paper confirms parties' reliance on traditional communication methods and pedestrian design (particularly evident in the usage of signs) while they barely utilise new media and then, with little enthusiasm, design creativity or appreciation of their potential. We go on to study the opportunities for the political campaign use of social media such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter and smartphone apps with reference to more successful campaign interventions, including examples from our research. This project moves beyond the anecdotal to appreciate the efficacy of recent forms of contemporary digital social media.

There is some evidence that political parties and their campaign directors are exploiting the lag in the laws pertaining to new media as compared to the more tightly controlled print and electronic media. Nevertheless, with the growth of new media participation rates, candidates have the opportunity to connect directly with potential supporters just as dissatisfaction and disillusionment with political parties is on the rise. The tension between the traditional forms of news media and the new digital and social media in the competition to be the preeminent source of political debate and information plays out in a myriad of ways: while traditional media use their power to generate moral panics about new media, new media can produce surprising turns for those who blithely use it without sufficient deference to its locution, mores and design conventions. New media will become more central to democratic deliberation and, just as television changed the political ground rules, new media will require new thinking about the design and communication of campaign strategies and materials. This paper concludes by raising the issue of whether new media will it lead to a decline in the quality of political discourse or whether it has the potential to improve democracy.

## Introduction

Democracy faces a harsh irony: since the end of the Cold War it has become the predominant form of government on the planet, but just at the moment of its triumph has arrived, there has been a crisis of faith in its ideological homelands (United States, Europe, Australia and New Zealand) where there is a growing dissatisfaction with the operations of democracy and an increasing awareness of the distance between rich and poor, political parties and voters, elite participants and mass consumers of contemporary political discourse (Stockwell, 2012: 525-527). These insights are confirmed by a range of empirical and qualitative data, most recently in Australia by evidence that “the influence of electoral politics seems to be waning” even while “non-electoral forms of engagement are much more attractive to the young” (Martin, 2012: 211).

People have not given up on democracy; rather, they are becoming aware of the deficiencies that have always bedeviled representative government, most particularly the distancing between politicians and their constituencies that occurs even at election times. In his *Representative Government*, J.S. Mill points to the problem when looking for the locus of the frank and fearless deliberation that gives democracy its legitimacy: the press is “the real equivalent, though not in all respects an adequate one, of the Pnyx and the Forum.” (Mill, 1991: 310) In Athens and even Rome, the citizen had a physical connection to the politician and vice versa as they were both in the same space during moments of deliberation. Mass society precludes this form of contact and the mass media by its very nature creates a distance between politician and citizen, both of whom rarely share the same physical space any more, even during election campaigns.

Thus the absence of contact during election campaigns has become symptomatic of the declining sense of connection in traditional democracies. This becomes a particularly significant flash point when cognisance is given to the growing literature on “democratization by elections” where even poor elections marked by corruption and malfeasance mean “authoritarian regimes

sometimes break down, sometimes morph into new forms of electoral authoritarian types and sometimes become gradually transformed into electoral democracy” (Lindberg, 2009: 2). In short, the experience of emerging democracies in recent years is that elections have a propensity to push states towards democracy, regardless of the quality of those elections.

The challenge for political parties and all those concerned about the quality of democracy and its future is how political campaigns can become more inclusive, more participative and more likely to provide a democratic experience. Print, radio and television have a long history as conduits of political campaigns and there are some useful accounts in the Australian context (Mills, 1986; Young, 2011). Central to the effective functioning of the campaign via traditional media is that campaign statements should be logically consistent so that opponents cannot portray inconsistency as a sign of weakness and confusion. Campaigns are carefully designed to ensure a disciplined consistency in the messages they produce. All print, radio and television advertisements, as well as free media, direct mail and personal appearances, hammer the same small set of core messages. That consistency is symbolically reinforced by cohesion in graphic design. Campaigns use the same candidate photo throughout and much work goes into the production of that photo, getting the “look” right, ensuring the background is thematically consistent with the campaign. In presidential-style campaigns, supporters are photographed with the leader, often against the same background, often with the leader and the supporter in the same poses. The use of the same colours, fonts and phrases in all campaign products further communicates a sense of consistency. The traditional view is that close coordination of all aspects of campaign advertising, publicity work and general communications produces synergies that give the campaign something more than the sum of its parts (Schnur, 1999).

What is less well understood, and this is of particular significance with regard to improving the participation of young citizens, is the potential effectiveness of the new digital social media in the construction of political advertising campaigns. While consistency and cohesion are still important elements in the

design of political campaign advertising, the shift from broadcast to interactive media throws up design questions around participation, authenticity and mobility if campaigns are to maximise the viral potential of new technologies where friends, neighbours and acquaintances become the primary conduits for political messages (Painter and Wardle, 2001).

Queensland in early 2012 provided a useful laboratory to study the interaction between political campaigns and the practice of democracy. The Queensland State election was quickly followed by state-wide Local Government elections. The Australian Labor Party had dominated the political environment in Queensland since 1989 but the government led by premier Anna Bligh was seen to be tired and had alienated many core supporters, particularly in the union movement, with the sale of state assets and the failure of the state health department to correctly pay employees. By contrast, the conservative parties had united under the leadership of Campbell Newman and coasted to a massive victory with a very standard campaign. Data was collected on the Gold Coast, which contained an equal number of marginal seats held by both sides of politics. Within a month, voters were back at the polls to elect a mayor and fourteen divisional councilors. While some council candidates identified as Liberals, party politics did not play an overt role in the campaign and many candidates identifies as independents. This paper studies the materials produced for both these campaigns to gauge the democratic temper of campaigns via both traditional media and new social media and how design elements contribute to the communication of political campaigns.

## **Literature**

There is some relevant research on new media and the electoral process that informs this paper. In the 2007 federal election campaign, the Australian Labor Party's leader, Kevin Rudd, made good use of social media; however, quantitative analysis of the 2007 Australian elections showed that new media had only minimal uptake by other candidates and they made little use of its interactive potential: while 61 per cent of Members of the House of

Representatives and Senators had a personal Web site, only 6.6 per cent had a blog; 5.75 per cent had posted a video on YouTube and 3.5 per cent had a Facebook site (Macnamara, 2008: 10). This paper offers some data that updates these findings. By way of contrast, the 2010 Australian federal election was held in an environment where social media, and Twitter in particular, was used much more by political journalists, political commentators and the general public. Computer-aided analysis of election-related Twitter messages shows an almost eerie absence of politicians and parties from social media but a much greater involvement of the general public and the production of an active deliberative sphere at 'hashtag communities' such as #ausvotes where citizens and journalists shared facts and opinions (Bruns and Burgess, 2011).

The use of new media in the previous (2009) Queensland elections has been subject to some academic analysis. Using Habermas's ideal types, Megan Kimber argued that political blogs viewed as public spheres offer scope for the expansion of deliberative democratic discussion. She analyses the group political blog, Pineapple Party Time, and finds that while bloggers and those who commented on their posts were engaged with politics and produced their own public space for the deliberative discussion, that space was minimised by the self-selecting participants, mostly Crikey readers (Kimber, 2012: 75).

There is an awareness that for democratic discussion to occur, the deliberative public sphere must be broadly accessible to all citizens. In the mean time, with the advent of the so-called 'Arab Spring', many are looking hopefully to new media to revitalise the public sphere. However, there is a concern that many claims about social media are overstated. Jim Macnamara et al. (2012: 623) analyse "five case studies of recent attempts by electoral management bodies in Australia and New Zealand to engage citizens in democratic participation" and find that the combative nature of social media and their resistance to traditional representative politics raises questions about the area's deliberative potential.

To provide a provisional summary of the literature in this fast developing area, while analyses of particular sites of political deliberation are useful for

understanding the potential that individual sites have in the promotion of debate and discussion around elections, to understand the gross impact of new media on political campaigning requires a macro approach that factors in the complex patterns of discourse, the invitation to agonistic interaction and the imperative inherent in social media to move beyond the expectations of traditional, rational deliberation in the context of civil society and to embrace the messy, divisive and raucous debate new technologies offer. The only positive aspect of this unappetising situation is that the cacophony of Facebook, Twitter and the rest may in fact actually and accurately reflect the real tenor of the real public sphere.

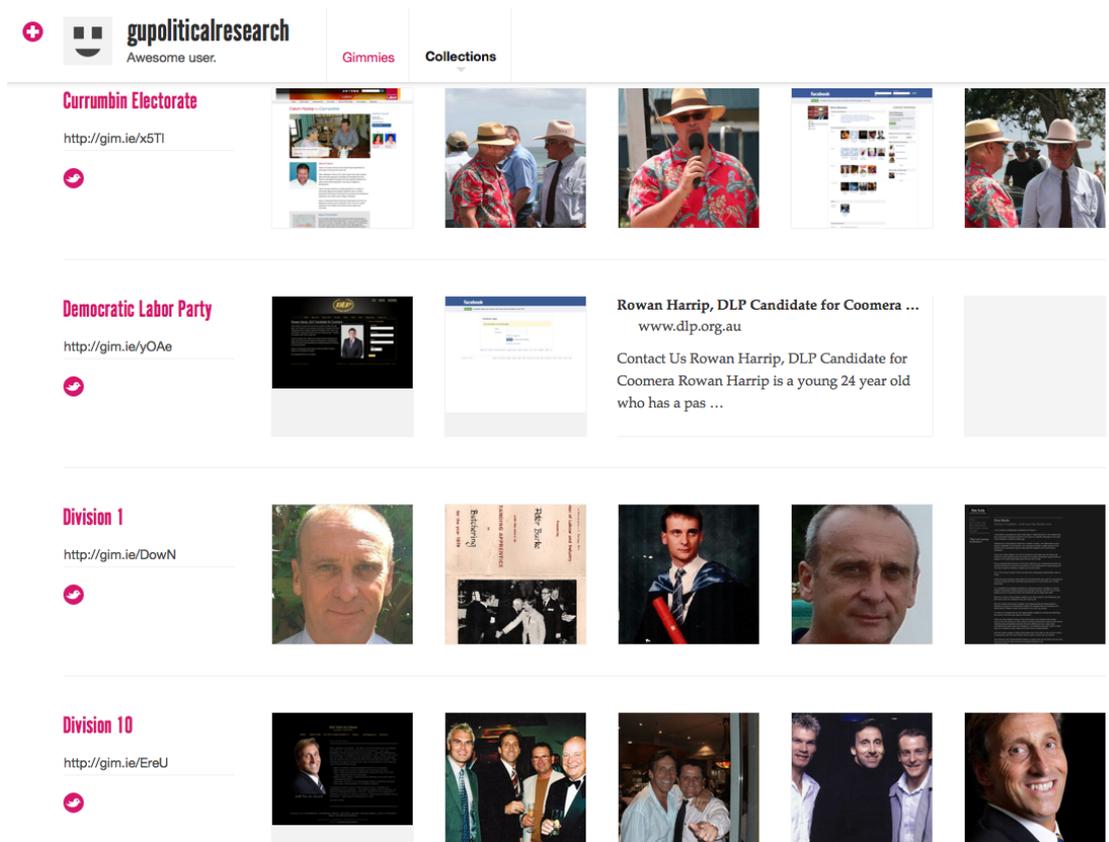
## **Method**

Methodology is a difficult issue in the complex quicksands of new media. While firmly based in the mathematical, the cybernetic experience of new media based in signaling loops, feedback and circular causality adds an extra-rational element to the mix that does not quite gel with traditional approaches to human perception. The imperative is to use available technology to capture the transient communications of a wide spread of new media forms. To that end, this project uses emerging forms of digital analysis including data-mining and geo-tagging to sketch the nature of contemporary political deliberations with relation to formal election experiences. In particular, this paper studies the opportunities for the political campaign use of social media such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter and smartphone apps with reference to successful and unsuccessful campaign interventions in examples from our research.

The occurrence of State and local campaigns in quick succession in early 2012 was an opportune moment to explore the use of new media in a mundane political environment. Early on it was appreciated that there was a need to limit the data, as a statewide sweep of material would resist analysis. As the research team was based on the Gold Coast, there was a particular

interest in local politics and the decision was made to limit investigations to the ten state seats covered in whole or part by the Gold Coast municipal district and the mayoralty and fourteen divisional councilors in that municipal area. To further limit the inflow of data, a decision was made that materials would only be collected in the formal election periods from the calling of the state election on 19 February 2012 to the holding of local government elections on 28 April 2012.

To provide a traditional baseline for this research, political stories and advertisements from the major local papers, *Gold Coast Bulletin* and *Courier-Mail*, were clipped. To gather new media relevant to the election period, the websites, Facebook pages, Twitter feeds, YouTube accounts of candidates and other online electoral materials were data-mined. Data mining is the process of recovering material and discovering patterns in large collections of data. Research assistants gathered material by searching for every candidate in every state electorate and each council division in the Gold Coast municipal area over the election material. The results of this project's data-mining exercise are stored on Gimme Bar where they can be analysed *in toto* or via collections relating to individual seats, divisions or parties. There are over 500 items at <https://gimmebar.com/loves/gupoliticalresearch> (see Figure 1). A summary of this research activity was produced as a spreadsheet and some of the outputs generated are displayed in the findings below (see Tables 1 and 2).



(Fig 1) Gimme Bar where online electoral materials are stored (<https://gimmebar.com/loves/gupoliticalresearch>)

In an application of new media research technologies to traditional campaign techniques, another group of research assistants documented the use of election signage during the election campaigns by taking photographs of individual signs while geo-tagging each photo as it was taken. Geo-tagging is the process of adding locational identification metadata such as latitude and longitude coordinates to any electronic media such as photographs, video, websites, mobile phone messages or other data-intensive materials. Once the photos were entered into the Flickr photographic storage site, the results could be displayed on maps to appreciate the spread of signage across electorates and areas of intense or sparse signage (see Figure 2).

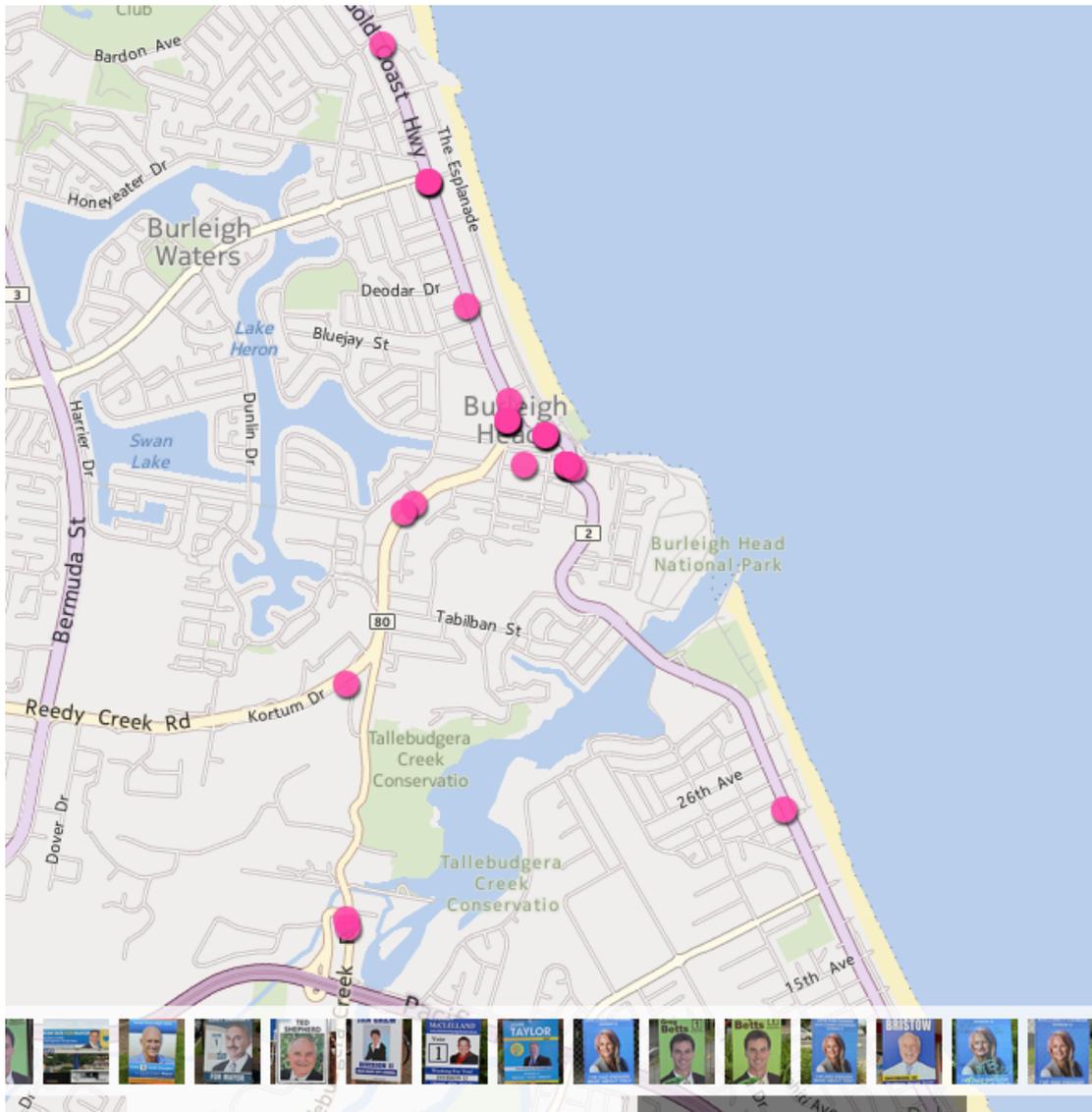


Fig. 2 Geo-tagged Division 12 signs ([http://www.flickr.com/photos/political\\_research2012/map?&fLat=-27.9607&fLon=153.3396&zl=6](http://www.flickr.com/photos/political_research2012/map?&fLat=-27.9607&fLon=153.3396&zl=6))

**Findings**

An immense amount of data was produced by this project and it continues to be analysed by a number of participants. This paper reports initial insights garnered from the materials. One such insight is that the gathering of large data loads prompts the search for tools to analyse and represent them. While initially the research team was sure that the materials gathered could be analysed, it has been instructive that online tools invented for other purposes

(storing examples of hobby interests, keeping track of holiday snaps) can be utilised for political research.

<b>Electorates</b>	# Candi dates	Website (Personal /Party)	Facebook Presence	Twitter Presence	LinkedIn	YouTube	> 100 Tweets 2012	> 100 Followers
Albert	5	5	4	2	0	0	0	0
Broadwater	7	6	5	3	0	0	0	0
Burleigh	5	4	3	1	1	0	0	0
Coomera	5	5	5	3	0	1	1	1
Currumbin	5	4	2	1	0	0	0	1
Gaven	6	6	5	3	0	1	0	1
Mermaid Beach	5	4	1	0	0	0	0	0
Mudgeeraba	5	5	3	4	2	1	2	1
Southport	5	4	5	4	0	0	1	2
Surfers Paradise	4	3	2	2	0	0	1	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>8</b>
%	100%	88.46%	63.31%	44.23%	5.78%	5.78%	9.62%	15.38%

Table 1: New technology use by Gold Coast State electorate candidates 2012

<b>Council Division</b>	# Candi dates	Website (Personal/ Party)	Facebook Presence	Twitter Presence	LinkedIn	YouTube	> 100 Tweets 2012	> 100 Followers
Division 1	4	4	1	0	0	0	0	0
Division 2	3	2	2	1	1	0	1	0
Division 3	4	3	2	2	2	0	2	2
Division 4	2	2	1	2	1	0	0	0
Division 5	5	5	5	1	1	1	0	1
Division 6	4	3	3	3	1	0	0	0
Division 7	7	5	6	3	2	1	1	2
Division 8	3	1	1	0	0	0	0	0
Division 9	3	2	2	1	1	0	1	1
Division 10	7	5	4	4	1	1	1	0
Division 11	5	3	3	3	4	1	1	1
Division 12	5	5	3	1	3	1	0	0
Division 13	5	2	2	1	1	0	0	0
Division 14	5	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mayoral	7	7	5	4	3	3	2	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>
%	100%	73.91%	57.97%	37.68%	30.43%	11.59%	13.04%	14.49%

Table 2: New technology use by Gold Coast City Council candidates 2012

The data in Tables 1 and 2 confirms the continuing political reliance on traditional communication methods. Certainly the comparison in Table 3 below between Macnamara’s (2008: 10) findings about the 2007 Commonwealth elections and this project’s 2012 research shows that there is greater “web presence” in recent elections.

Election	Website	Facebook	Blog/Twitter	YouTube
Cwth 2007	61	3.5	6.6	5.75
QState 2012	88.5	63.3	44.2	5.78
GCLocal 2012	73.9	58.0	37.7	11.6

Table 3: Percentage of candidates utilising new communications technologies

However, there is a clear sense that for most campaigns this is just a formal activity required as an outward signal that they are ‘with it’. The small number of candidates with significant numbers of Facebook likes or Twitter posts or followers reveals the desultory uptake of new media and then with little enthusiasm, design creativity or appreciation of their potential. Only two candidates had Twitter followers in the thousands. Both of them are new media professionals and it is instructive that one candidate (Craig Caldwell, Division 3) had previously been disendorsed from the state election by the Liberal National Party for innocuous photos on his Facebook site (he was dressed as a pirate). This research appears to confirm that while many “are looking optimistically to social media to reinvigorate the public sphere... claims in relation to social media are over-stated” (Macnamara, 2012: 65).

Analysis of data-mined materials reveals that, while there was a plethora of posts to candidate web sites, much of it was traditional material merely repurposed for the web: photos of the candidate, often in formal poses or staged settings with a few supporters; press releases parroting party lines with very little opportunity for public reaction; and centrally-sourced policy statements without an invitation for ongoing interactivity. Very little emerged that suggested candidates were moving beyond traditional concepts of campaign consistency and cohesion to make use of new technologies to establish more intimate rapport directly with voters. A few candidates did

make use of Twitter in an attempt to foster ongoing conversations with voters; 6.6% of candidates issued 200 or more tweets in 2012. Analysis of the geo-tagged candidate signage confirmed the energy and expense that goes into managing these traditional campaign tools. Not only were the signs ubiquitous (most candidates had more street signs than tweets) but there were clearly continuing tussles for the most prominent road-side locations, particularly along highways, and a lot of creativity went into the defacing of opposition signs.

## **Conclusion**

It is clear that the growth of new media provides campaigns and candidates with a fresh space to make direct connections with voters to convince them to become supporters. As dissatisfaction and disillusion with political parties grows and traditional campaign techniques are understood by voters to be manipulative and self-serving, there is a striking opportunity for insurgent campaigns to use new technologies to connect with swinging voters. It is important to appreciate that, while new media provides new conduits to voters, they are not a panacea. Many potential voters are not on Twitter and, even if they are on Facebook, their use is minimal and centres on contact with family and close real-world friends. However, the Obama 2012 presidential election points to other possibilities for the use of new technology.

The 2012 Obama campaign indicated its strategic perspective on new technology early by appointing 'a chief scientist' from Silicon Valley who ran a small team to write code to marry disparate databases and draw together available information (O'Malley, 2012: 3). Then the campaign added further information from commercially available databases and from rally participants who were encouraged to provide their names and numbers in the heat of the event. Rather than door-knock a whole neighbourhood, volunteers had smartphone apps that accessed this mountain of data and told them who was 'persuadable'. The app also allowed them to report back on their interaction immediately and for fresh data to be instantaneously added to the bank of

material available to the campaign for further decision-making purposes. Supporters were contacted and told which of their Facebook friends had not registered to vote. While Republicans worked on the supposition that many former Democrat voters would be disillusioned, 700,000 Obama volunteers made 125 million contacts, registered 1.8 million new voters and convinced many supporters to vote early. The Obama team took a scientific approach and used new technology to target and track potential voters with a precision not previously achieved in a political campaign, but the team's success rests on its ability to persuade those contacted to support Obama with traditional arguments based on logic, emotion and the character of the president.

There is an undeniable sense of tension between the traditional forms of news media (print, radio, TV) and new digital/social media. There is a tussle between old and new media as to which provides the best access to political information and deliberation. Traditional media can use its strength to create moral panics about new media (as Cameron Caldwell found), new media has many traps for the unwary who use the opportunities they provide without considering the new grammar, rules and design considerations that it brings. It is evident that no campaign can be without its new media interventions if it is to be taken seriously, but as voters become more 'au fait' with the possibilities of new media, they will have greater expectations about what comes across their electronic devices. It is the voters who will push campaigns to provide more opportunities for online democratic deliberation. Historians of political campaigns point out how first radio and then television changed the way campaigns approached political contests. It would be ignoring the lessons of history to think that new media will not force campaigners to take new approaches to the design of campaign strategies and the communication materials that they utilise. It is more than fair to raise the issue of whether new media will improve the quality of political discourse or whether it will degrade it. Political parties and their campaign directors are not beyond exploiting the lag in the laws controlling new media to send messages that would be precluded by the tighter controls over print, radio and television. However, campaigns that use new media to build real relationships with voters both on-line and in the real world will benefit.

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