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SIGRID BARINGHORST, VERONIKA KNEIP,
JOHANNA NIESYTO (EDS.)

Political Campaigning on the Web

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Drawing upon a common conceptual framework of political webcampaigning the book offers theoretical reflections on Internet-based campaign politics. It provides a comparative overview on the use of the Internet as a campaigning instrument by diverse intermediary political actors. Taking the empirical findings of Internet appropriations into consideration, the book discusses the impact of political webcampaigning on (transnational) democracy and the transformation of public spheres.

Sigrid Baringhorst (Prof. Dr. phil.) is working at the Department of Social Sciences in the field of comparative political studies and political sociology. She is director of the research project »Changing Protest and Media Cultures« at the Collaborative Research Centre »Media Upheavals« (University of Siegen).

Veronika Kneip and **Johanna Niesyto** are research fellows in the project »Changing Protest and Media Cultures«.

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General Reflections on Political Campaigning on the Web

Sigrid Baringhorst

Introduction: Political Campaigning in Changing Media Cultures – Typological and Historical Approaches

This chapter aims at developing a general definition and typology of political campaigning based on a comparison of different types of political actors, different types of aims involved as well as time and space-related differences. It gives an overview of major changes in the history of political campaigning by focussing on the interrelations between changing modes of political campaigning and processes of modernization of media technology and media systems, as well as general changes in political cultures in Western European societies. With regard to the latter, it discusses the decline of old ideological political campaigning and the rise of single issue-oriented campaigns. This occurred against the background of other social transformations, which lead to a weakening of class-based politics and the weakening of affiliations between citizens, political institutions and organizations, as well as a growing understanding of publics as audiences and of citizens as customers. The introduction of public TV and, even more so, of commercial TV has changed practices of political campaigning by strengthening trends of professionalization, centralization, visualization, personalization, audience targeting, multi-mediatization, and the increased dynamism of political campaigning, while challenging traditional notions of liberal as well as participatory democracy. The final part of this chapter asks, are these trends reversed by the introduction and spread of virtual or virtualized campaigns? Or do we see a multi-directional change, cross-tendencies of centripetal orientation towards mass media attention combined with centrifugal diversification and orientation to a more and more fragmented *public of publics* (Bohman 2004)?

Between War and Market Operations: Definition and Typologies of Political Campaigning

Political campaigning has become a mode of articulation of the political that encompasses all political subject areas and types of political actors. Before we discuss in the next section some reasons for the growing dominance of professional political campaigning in public opinion formation, first it is necessary to develop a general definition and typology of political campaigning.

An etymological approach to defining political campaigning highlights the similarity of political campaigns with social actions in the fields of war and markets. *Campaign* is etymologically derived from the late-Latin *campania* meaning *level country* (from Latin *campus* a *field*). The term originally denoted a temporarily limited activity in the country as well as any *expeditio*, any temporarily limited military operation. The period of military campaigns was determined by the seasons: it usually started in June when armies took to the open field or battlefield and ended by November when they withdrew from the campaign to spend the winter in quarters. In England by mid 17th century, the term took on a non-literal meaning when the sessions of the House of Commons were called *campaigns*. With the introduction of democratic elections to Parliament, the meaning of the word shifted to strategic endeavours that competitors undertook to get as many votes as possible in order to gain a parliamentary seat (Leggewie 2006: 107). *Campaign* became synonymous for any race between candidates for elective office, the verb *campaigning* generally meant “an effort to win any kind of election, but most particularly the phase involving open, active electioneering” (Safire 1993: 98).

The military and political meaning was extended to also denote strategic operations in the market sphere in late 19th and early 20th century. In the context of advertising, campaigns signified strategies of commercial communication aiming at informing customers about goods and services as well as persuading them to buy these products usually through the means of brand creation and reinforcement. Today campaigns have become ubiquitous in the commercial as well as in the political arena. Given the plethora of strategic actions in all societal subsystems, it is difficult to gain a precise definition, covering all types of campaigns. Generally campaigns can be understood as a series of communicative activities undertaken to achieve predefined goals and objectives regarding a defined target audience in a set time period with a given amount of resources. Thus campaigns can be distinguished with regard to their goals, their strategies, tactics, and tools, as well as in relation to campaign actors and targeted audiences.

A lowest common denominator can be seen regarding the goals and objectives involved. Three minimal goals are shared by all campaigns: 1. Gaining public awareness for a particular cause, service, organization or person; 2. generating credibility for a person or organization; and 3. generating cognitive, evaluative and behavioural changes in a targeted group of people (Saxer 2006: 30-31; Bonfadelli 2004: 101). Campaigns give information, but also want to gain acceptance for certain principles, causes, services and often mobilize for a particular political action like voting for a particular candidate or party, becoming a member of an organization or donating resources to an organization. The behavioural effect can consist in just a one-off action, like voting. How-

ever, often campaigns are intended to lead to more lasting behaviour changes and socialization effects. Information, persuasion and socialization are according to Swanson and Mancini (1996: 53) the crucial aspects of political mobilization by campaigning:

[...] while information assumes a ready-made consensus that can be activated by tapping upon shared interests, grievances and habitus, the persuasive and socializing patterns deal with the construction of issues, purposes, interests and preferences. In the case of persuasion, mobilization is about the explicit, supplementary efforts to convince individuals to become active by giving them good reasons to join a good cause. [...] Finally socialisation is proposed as a process through which mobilization generates and reproduces its own conditions: shared commitments, preferences, interests and identities.

Political campaigns can be analytically differentiated as informational and educational campaigns to achieve a better understanding of and awareness for certain issues, as action campaigns to mobilize for a certain action in a targeted audience, as recruiting campaigns to win new members or supporters or other resources for an organization, or as influence-seeking campaigns to lobby political decision-makers for a certain issue. These distinctions are only analytical, since political campaigning usually combines several of these goals (Lahusen 1997: 179; Lahusen 2002: 40; Kamps 2007).

Looking at the multitude of campaigning actors, one can distinguish political campaigns according to the type of actors that initiate them. As mentioned above, campaigns are usually launched by organizational actors and not individual actors, although particularly election campaigns in majority vote systems often give the impression of being launched by persons and not parties. Due, however, to the cost intensity of current electoral campaigns and the low winning chances of candidates not affiliated with a political party, parties play a major role particularly on the national and European level of electoral campaigning. Compared to other organizational actors, political communication research has put a major emphasis on the political campaigning of political parties; less attention is given to campaigning by government institutions.¹ The history of government campaigning, however, is as long as of electoral campaigning and develops parallel to the democratization of nation-states in the 19th century. The transition from professional armies to mass recruited armies has particularly put governments under pressure to secure public acceptance

1 For an overview of political parties' webcampaigning see Zielmann/Röttger in this volume; Niesyto (in this volume) broaches the issue of governmental webcampaigning with the example of the European Union.

for military operations with high demands on capital resources and potential death tolls. This leads government campaigns to dramatize political conflicts and legitimize military action. Persuasive campaigns have become an integral part of military campaigning. In peacetime as well, government institutions address citizens in campaigns to inform them on and gain acceptance for new and controversial political measures that usually either involve regulatory changes that have an impact on the collective identity formation, such as the introduction of the Euro, or that have a strong impact on the redistribution of public resources. Another field of government campaigning are national, regional, or urban campaigns either directed at constructing and reconfirming collective identities and/or seeking positive resonance in the international political or competitive economic arena (Baringhorst 2004).

Political campaigns are usually analyzed as strategic communicative activities on the politics dimension of the political, as they are launched to position actors in processes of political competition, interest or value-oriented conflicts. Political campaigning can also, however, play a crucial role in the policy implementation processes. Current problems of state deficit have given campaigning strategies of persuasion a more prominent role in packaging political measures and have led to an increase of policy campaigns like campaigns against obesity or other lifestyle related health campaigns like safe-sex and family-planning campaigns.

Another type of political actor consists of intermediary organization actors like interest and lobby groups and, most of all, professional organizations like unions and employers' federations. Interest groups launch campaigns to legitimate their particularistic demands, to gain support among a wider public, gain and/or lobby political decision-makers. Campaigns play a major role in organizational relationship management in terms of communicating certain issues or constructing favourable organizational images either as part of everyday organizational management or as part of a particular crisis management. Partly overlapping with social interest groups are the vast number of civil society actors, which are defined by their independence from state institutions as well as from economic profit seeking and usually articulate their claims as universalistic aims. Campaigning by interest groups and civil society actors covers the whole range of campaigning goals. However, while government actors resort to campaigning most often as a means of information and education (*information and educational campaign*) or of promoting certain services (*product campaigning*) or in order to create certain images (*national or regional image campaigns*), interest groups and civil society actors most often combine functions of information and image creation with the mobilization for certain activities in order to build up public pressure (*action campaigns*) and/or for the mobilization of

social solidarity to support moral issues like social justice or human rights (*solidarity campaigns*).

Another approach to categorize the plethora of political campaigns is based on time and space related criteria. Although electoral campaigns are clearly determined by their purpose and periodical timing as well as by clearly defined territorial constituents, many authors see current political communication in Western democracies characterized by a change from temporally defined campaigning to *permanent campaigning* (Norris 2000). This trend, however, does not only apply to political party campaigning. Supported by the networking facilities of web-based communication technologies, transnational civil society action networks have emerged that put forward their demands in *permanent protest campaigns* (Bennett 2004). In many cases, these permanent transnational protest campaigns are identified as political actors and not as a communicative activity of collective actors. The organizational members of these networks disappear behind campaign labels like *International Campaign against Landmines*, *Jubilee Campaign* or *Clean Clothes Campaign*. The goals of these permanent umbrella campaigns are articulated in changing and temporally limited action campaigns putting forward clearly defined demands against certain opponents among specific government or corporate actors.

Campaigns can be further analyzed from their external or internal communicative dimension, regarding their external relations as they aim to inform and mobilize a wider public or clearly defined target groups, and internally as they have to coordinate and emotionally integrate organizational members and supporters. Building on the general distinction between internal and external communication, Vowe (2006) has suggested to differentiate the communicative strategies of political campaigns on four communicative dimensions: firstly, the internal communication aims at orienting coordinated actors towards a common goal, secondly the conflict dimension of communication, covering the orientation towards a political opponent, strives to exploit the opponent's weaknesses, thirdly the media communication intends to change public opinion formation and fourthly the communication that results from media resonance, such as a campaign being mentioned in a parliamentary debate, at political party meetings or in everyday street corner conversations.

Changing Media and Political Culture – Impact on Political Campaigning

Despite numerous differences between political campaigns, all strive to cause cognitive, behavioural or evaluative effects in more or less clearly defined target groups. In order to achieve their goals, they all aim at gaining response

from the media, most of all from the mass media (Röttger 2006: 10). Mobilizing target groups and getting mass media resonance are closely intertwined: high media resonance and high resonance with the addressed target audiences necessitate each other. Changing media environments as well as social and political-cultural changes among targeted audiences have, as it is argued in the following, direct as well as indirect implications for the historical development of political campaigning.

According to Pippa Norris (2000: 137-179), electoral campaigning evolved in reaction to changes of party organization, news media and the electorate in three major stages: premodern, modern and postmodern campaigning. This typology of evolutionary transition does not only apply to election campaigns. Norris' theoretical framework, it is argued, can be extended and applied for the broader conception of political campaigns developed before. Thus, the following paragraphs will take Norris' trisection as a starting point to structure the historical change of political campaigning in Western liberal democracies in general. Furthermore, this systematization will provide the basis for the subsequent remarks concerning the impact of new media.

Premodern campaigning has its origin in the 19th century expansion of franchise and was more or less reduced to electoral campaigning. It is characterized by comparatively low financial resources spent on campaigning and a high dependency on the involvement of volunteers and grassroots members providing unpaid labour for local candidates and party branches by canvassing, leafleting, and organizing gatherings. Direct face-to-face contact between voters and party representatives was essential. Volunteer labour intensity was high, but the degree of professionalization as well as the sophistication of media technology of campaigning low. The media environment of premodern campaigning was characterized by a dominance of party owned press products as sources of information and newspapers with a clear political party affiliation. The introduction and spread of radio and newsreels since the 1920s contributed to a strengthening of the national dimension of party organizations and campaigning structures. Relatively stable sector-based social cleavages translated into party systems as well as into individual voting behaviour (Lipset/Rokkan 1967), shaping the political culture that favoured premodern campaigning. Party affiliations were high and reinforcing partisan supporters was the main purpose of campaigning (Lazarsfeld et. al. 1944).

Changes in media technology, media and political culture since the mid-1950s have led to a modernization of campaign communication characterized by a shift of campaign focus from the local to the national level of organizations: although the proportion of the electorate directly contacted by party organizations has not decreased, "direct forms of campaigning have become ancillary in general elections to mediated channels of party-voter communica-

tion” (Norris 2000: 142). The national centralization of campaigning emerged on the background of new media technologies and cultures, mostly marked by the rise of public broadcasting starting with Franklin D. Roosevelt’s radio addresses – the so called *fireside chats* – and the first presidential debate on TV between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon in 1960. Since then the intended media resonance of political campaigning was mainly interpreted in terms of resonance in the national evening news on public TV channels. TV communication altered the conditions for political campaigning in many respects: as the news was emancipated and independent from political party grip, norms of impartiality and neutrality were mandated and, thus, contributed to a general decrease of the influence of exposure of citizens to political party communication. Apart from this, television “enlarged the audience for political communication by penetrating a sector of the electorate that was previously more difficult to reach and less heavily exposed to message flows” (Blumler/Kavanagh 1999: 212).

The golden age of parties (Janda/Colman 1998: 612) lasted up to the mid-1960s when long-lasting voter identifications decreased and a process of dealignment led to a structural decoupling of party systems, voter behaviour, and entrenched cleavages of social structure. The period of “high levels of confidence in political institutions” (Hallin 1992: 17) ended with the growing influence of televised politics. Not only political parties but also professional interest groups, civil society actors, and government institutions had to work harder “and learn new tricks” (Blumler/Kavanagh 1999: 215), a new language of soundbites as much as target group oriented campaigning strategies, to get their messages across. Given the fact that media attention is a highly scarce resource and becoming ever more difficult to gain, persuasive strategies of political campaigns became more and more strategically organized in order to address clearly defined target groups with a set of different communicative tools like advertising, marketing or PR. Generating public TV resonance was not only relevant for electoral campaigning, it also played a major role in protest campaigning by civil society actors, as shown by analysis of campaigning among the student movement in the 1960s (Fahlenbrach 2002). However, media strategies of civil society actors were more complex than political party campaigning as they addressed two opposing but also complementary media environments: on the one hand, rallies, festivals, and press releases addressed plenty of alternative grassroots-oriented media, on the other hand, protest actors were also aiming at generating a response in mainstream TV and press despite the fact that mass media were heavily criticized for being hegemonic and manipulative. The increasing orientation of political campaigning towards gaining TV responses resulted in the growing tendencies of visualization and personalization of communication in all types of campaigning. The shifting

trend from cleavage-based ideological class politics to personalization and de-ideologization of political communication is clearly shown in electoral campaigning,² however, personalization and visualization are not only confined to political party campaigning. Analysis of social movement campaigning has similarly given evidence of an increased role of celebrities in testimonials and as promoters of protest issues (ibid.).

Despite many similarities between political party and civil society organizational campaigning in the 1960s and 1970s, there are also marked differences. These refer most of all to the degree of professionalization of campaigning, which was highly influenced by the introduction and gradually intensified use of opinion-polls since the 1950s. Anja Kruke (2007) has analyzed the impact of opinion polls on party politics in the Federal Republic of Germany. Referring to the German Social Democratic Party, she has shown how opinion polls generated new forms of social self-descriptions and shaped new structures and patterns of action and communication among political elites. Opinion polls changed the relation between parties, media and voters, making parties more 'responsive' – a phrase entering the German language in the context of the spread of opinion polls in the 1960s – and leading to new framing strategies and new forms of voter contact like home visits, in order to attract new groups of voters. Based on opinion polls, market research and situation analysis, electoral campaign messages were increasingly tailored to appeal to particular target audiences, thus leading to an increasing segmentation of the national public. Overall professionalization can be understood as twofold: on the one hand it means a process of externalization of campaigning functions in the sense of a synthesis of commercialization and specialization (Donges 2006: 133). Party political actors, but also influential NGOs, unions, and other political actors, pay for communication experts like media consulting agencies, opinion pollsters, advertising and PR agencies. Besides, professionalization can also signify a characteristic of those *specialists of persuasive communication* (Holtz-Bacha 1999: 10), i.e. a specialization of political consulting as a new professional career.

The third evolutionary phase of political campaigning is still ongoing and can be characterized as *postmodern campaigning* (Norris 2000: 147-149). Supplementing rather than replacing former modes of campaigning, the newest period of campaigning is enforcing former trends of modern campaigning in so far as campaigning has become ever more capital intensive, less dependent on the support of volunteers, and professionalized in its personnel as well as

2 Personalization of campaigning is not necessarily combined with a corresponding reorientation of voters' behaviour. The impact of party leaders on voting behaviour is still disputed particularly regarding parliamentary systems.

means of persuasion. Blumler and Kavanagh (1999) have called the media environment of postmodern campaigning the *Third Age of Political Communication*. They see this most recent period characterized by a pluralization of media channels due to the introduction of commercial satellite and cable stations and, as will be discussed in the next section, the spread of Internet communication, resulting in ubiquity, reach, and celerity of the main means of communication, an acceleration of news cycles and, overall, a changing culture of journalism. The main consequences for political communication are seen in:

- *Intensified Professionalization of Political Advocacy* has led to an increase in dependency of political actors on professional assistance to manage media resonance.
- *Increased Competitive Pressures* wherein political actors have to feed an increasing number of media channels in order to achieve campaign aims.
- *Anti-Elitist-Popularization and Populism* strengthening bottom-up structures of political communication over top-down structures.
- *Centrifugal Diversification* in which, contrary to the centripetal tendency of communication in the period dominated by national public TV broadcasting channels, media recipients have more media options on offer. Thus political campaigning has to be more tailored according to a pluralized media system targeting a highly fragmented audience. “It creates openings for previously excluded voices to express their views and perhaps even be noticed by mainstream outlets. It creates opportunities for would-be persuaders to seek more efficient impact by selectively focussing their communication on preferred population sectors” (Blumler/Kavanagh 1999).

The role of political actors in this process is still unclear. From one perspective they primarily seem to be objects of change, driven to adjust rapidly to new media environments (Norris 2000; Blumler/Kavanagh 1999).³ From another perspective they are the dynamic subjects of change. “The consumer has triumphed over the citizen” (Crouch 2004: 49) in concepts of *political marketing* (Scammell 1999) as well as concepts of *post-democracy* (Crouch). Particular political party actors are seen as promoting a customer-first approach in political campaigning contrary to old top-down strategies of selling candidates and is-

3 The postmodern conceptualization sees politicians essentially “lagging behind technological and economic changes, and running hard just to stay in place by adopting the techniques of political marketing in the struggle to cope with the more complex news environment – rather than driving these developments” (Norris 2000: 149).

sues mainly through means of advertising. Given the pluralization of media outlets, the increasing fragmentation of audiences, the decreasing organizational affiliation expressed in declining party and union membership and growing voter volatility, the success of political campaigning has become less and less predictable. In the highly complex system of news media, a growing number of campaigning actors have to compete for media attention and resonance by targeting fragments of the population. Due to increasing complexity and competition on all sides, i.e. media channels, segmented audiences and campaigning activities, the marginal utility of political campaigning is diminishing (Bonfadelli 2004) and the risk of getting lost among competing attempts to get media attention is high.

Not only political parties but also interest groups and protest actors have responded to the decreased marginal utility of campaigning with primarily two counter-strategies: on the one hand, political actors take a lot of measures in order to increase the news value of campaigns; on the other hand, they try to lower campaign costs by resorting to new media. With regard to the first option, campaigners develop campaigning strategies on the basis of event marketing and entertainment product placement, providing media gate keepers with sensationalist messages, exceptional visuals, celebrities as testimonials, and dramatized courses of event. Greenpeace campaigning has often been cited as a successful forerunner in developing professionalized event orientation in postmodern campaigning. Adopting the sign-economic laws of mass media communication increases the chances of being heard in the jungle of mediated messages, however, it also bears the danger of reducing complex issues to an extent that citizens lack the necessary informational background to take reasoned decisions. Event orientation in campaigning is often combined with strategies of morally loading campaign messages, dramatizing events according to binary schemata of good and evil, heroes and villains. This polarization and moralization of political campaigning reduces the scope for rational political discourse. Not denying the agonistic character of politics in general, there is dynamic of constant dramatization of conflicts in political campaigning that undermines the democratic culture of informed political contestation, discourse, and opinion formation.

New Media and Political Campaigning

Regarding the second option to confront the problem of diminishing marginal utility, the Internet has offered all political actors new chances to differentiate their strategies and achieve their aims at lower costs. First of all, web-based campaigning facilitates the information function of political campaigning.

While the adaptation to a competitive commercialized mass media culture has reduced the incentive to explain campaign issues in long statements and favoured a campaign culture of sound bites and strong visuals, the Internet has significantly reduced transaction costs of political information and mobilization due to its speed and the outreach of its communication. It offers opportunities to overcome traditional spatial limitations and contributes to a decentralization as well as transnationalization of political campaigning.

John Street and Alan Scott (2001: 46) have summed up their considerations on the consequences of the spread of the Internet for political communication as: “High impact on little resource”. Many authors share their assumption that most of all resource poor political actors like protest actors and small political parties benefit from digitalized communication (Diani 2001: 122-123). However, big political parties, powerful interest groups, and civil society organizations, in particular those that operate with highly confrontational strategies (e.g. Greenpeace), extensively use the productive as well as co-productive means of the Internet. They use the Internet for extensive top-down communication by producing and providing large amounts of information on their websites, but they also provide means for participatory forms of interaction and offer members – and with varying degrees also non-members – opportunities to express and exchange their views on controversial issues of organizational campaigning, e.g. in the section *Campaign Issues* in the *Greenpeace Cybercentre* (cybercentre.greenpeace.org). Apart from that, they professionalize their action campaigning by strategically using the accelerated processes of Internet communication to improve conflict dramatization and put attacked opponents under pressure.

The logistic advantages of Internet communication for resource poor organizations are not to be underestimated but undifferentiated assumptions of a particular empowerment of weak collective actors through the Internet have to be understood relatively. Firstly, the use of the Internet still presupposes more financial and human capital resources than often acknowledged. Even big parties, interest groups, and social movement organizations stress the high costs that are connected with the adaptation of technical tools and the constant need to update information and to moderate interactive means of participation. Apart from that, the individual access to and use of political information on the Internet is still far from evenly distributed and according to the thesis of *digital divide* (Norris 2001) highly selective. Internet communication represents a new source of political inequality and, thus, it is hardly able to generate democratic legitimacy for campaign actors. According to the enforcement thesis, the Internet aggravates existing differences in political participation instead of compensating for them. “As a means of political communication the Internet offers several advantages from the perspective of interested citizens but it is

overestimated in terms of its relevance as a medium of activating the citizenry and democratizing political discourses” (Rucht et al. 2004: 90-91, translation S.B.). The selectivity of Internet access follows geographical and socio-demographical factors. In all world regions, Internet access and use is unequal regarding age and gender as well as education and income.

Apart from that, many experts argue that the Internet benefits active citizens more than politically inactive and desinterested citizens (e.g. Emmer et al. 2006). Though in their analysis of the participatory potentials of digital Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) among the supporters of the *British Countryside Alliance*, Lusoli and Ward (2006: 76), have found not only evidence for the enforcement thesis, but their empirical findings also strengthen the mobilization thesis. According to the mobilization thesis, the Internet also motivates those citizens to participate politically, who would have stayed inactive without the Internet. Digital ICTs, they argue, have important *widening* as well *deepening* effects on participatory potential (ibid.: 75). The protest organization could address new supporters via website and email contributed to an enforcement of political activity particularly among those who already had been members of the organization.

As mentioned above, political campaigns aim at evoking cognitive, evaluative, and behavioural changes in a defined target group or audience. In order to achieve these goals they have to gain mass media resonance either in order to reach individual recipients and/or in order to put scandalized collective actors under pressure, as is the case, for instance with many protest campaigns. To what extent has Internet campaigning altered this need to generate mass media response or – more generally – how has it changed the relation between campaign actors and mass media? The Internet differs from older media in so far as it allows for *desintermediation*. Meso-media of political campaigns like campaign websites and blogs can compensate for the logistical deficits of former organizational media like party newsletters, interest group brochures or radical protest media (Atton 2002: 139). The problem of needing high circulation figures in order to cover organizational costs of organizational media is rendered unimportant for online-media. The latter are neither limited in time nor limited in their scope of current and archived information. Members of geographically dispersed and even culturally heterogeneous collective actors can mutually observe each other on the Internet and develop shared understandings of political issues. Thus the traditional distinction between internal and external communication of campaign actors has become less important (Rucht 2004: 51) or at least permeable (della Porta et. al. 2006: 93). While organizational media have been mainly directed to an internal audience of members and supporters, now the possibilities to find resonance for organizational news and pictures via the meso-media of the Internet are increased.

All in all, Internet communication offers political organizations significantly more power in defining and framing images of candidates and organizations as well as controversial issues. Unfavourable print and TV news can be confronted with an organization's own views in instant rebuttals and with low costs via organizational meso-media like campaign websites and micro-media like emails (Street/Scott 2001: 46).

The literature on political communication on the Internet stresses the snowball effects of a reconnected communication between online micro and meso-media on the one hand and macro-mass media on the other hand, in order to highlight the increased organizational power of definition as well as a grown importance of individual actors over collective actors (e.g. Peretti/Micheletti 2004: 138-139). Any stakeholder or member of a powerful organization can easily leak secret information anonymously and make it open to a wider public on the Internet. While in former times political scandals were based on personal contacts between informant and journalist, in the context of *desintermediated* Internet communication anybody can become a powerful opponent independent from journalistic gatekeepers.

Less analyzed than the use of the Internet as a means of information and framing is the use of the Internet as a tactical media of political campaigning. To what extent does the Internet provide a *new repertoire of collective action* (Cardon/Granjon 2003)? Civil society actors in particular have used online media as a 'weapon' and target of political campaigning (Jordan 2004). The repertoire of virtual political action displays a mixture of known forms of civil disobedience and *recombinant forms* that have only been rendered possible through the technical potential of the Internet (Schönberger 2005). First applied and still often used is the articulation of political claims and complaints in forms of electronic petitions. Organizations like *Campact* (www.campact.de) have perfected this electronic mode of campaigning politics by, particularly, launching Internet campaigns for diverse issues based on standardized information packages and action procedures ideally suited for the educated political activist short of time but devoted to diverse political complaints. Less known and used are virtual campaign practices that mobilize online rallies like they have been developed in the context of the *Euro Mayday Parade* or Internet strikes and denial-of-service-attacks. They aim at deactivating symbolic targets like a certain website through the mobilization of Internet users via chat groups and mailing lists. Online activities are most often closely connected with offline activities. Regarding other campaigning functions like informing and framing, mobilizing through the Internet is not replacing but rather supplementing traditional organizational and mass media. Critics often argue that online petitions are perceived by addressees of campaigns like government actors as well media gate-keepers as being less influential than activities that

entail a higher degree of personal involvement (Rucht 2004: 51). However, the research project on anti-corporate campaigning on the Internet, carried out at the University of Siegen, supports the counter-thesis insofar as the targeted companies systematically scan the Internet in order to anticipate future criticism and protest.⁴ They seem to take standardized protest more relevant than critics suggest. There was also hardly any evidence for the assumption that individual supporters would suffer from what Voss (2007: 184) has called *campaign fatigue* and disinterest due to standardized forms of mobilization on the Internet.

Altogether, it seems that the general dilemma of gaining media and audience attention for political campaign issues in a highly competitive media culture and fragmented audience structure cannot be solved by simply introducing the issues to the new media arena. As Internet activism is usually less directly targeting a political opponent than aiming at gaining mass media response, new online activities like mail bombings or Internet strikes are bound to lose their spectacular character the more they become an integrated part of Internet campaigning. These new activities got a lot of press coverage when they were first experimented with several years ago, but soon after that they have lost their novelty and thus also news value.

Web Campaigning – A Solution to the Dilemma of Mass Media Campaigning?

“The potential of net communication is [...] remarkable if there are shifts in traditional modes of organization. Hence, reformation of organization and modification of social practice present underlying challenges for realizing innovation of political communication via net communication” (Jarren 1998: 21, translation S.B.). Criticism against the reduction of political complexity in moralized, personalized, and highly professionalized political campaigning is often based on two main arguments: firstly, the growing dominance of political campaigning is seen as an indicator for an overriding orientation of political communication towards strategic, instrumental, and non-communicative political action. Non-governmental organizations and other civil society actors, it is often argued, have adjusted to the communicative strategies of mainstream political as well as commercial actors and presented their issues in social advertising, marketing or public relations campaigns (Baringhorst 1998; 2006),

4 Kneip (in this volume) provides detailed information about this research project and presents some findings on the interrelations between protest and corporate action on the web.

thus giving up on former aims of democratizing the public sphere by confronting manipulative top-down communication with more egalitarian spaces of public deliberation.

The second argument against the hegemonic character of political campaigning relates to the segmentation of the public into numerous disconnected target groups in professional political marketing. To what extent, it is finally asked, does web campaigning counteract these major shortcomings of mass media campaigning? Although much research is still needed to give empirically valid evidence on the role of ICTs in political campaigning, it seems that the logic of campaigning as it has developed by the adaptation to news factors of mass media gate-keepers is not significantly reduced by the introduction and spread of Internet communication. There is more potential for information, individual participation, and dialogical communication. The realization of this potential in party and governmental political campaigning as well as civil society campaigning has not fundamentally altered the traditional top-down structure of campaign communication.

On the one hand, political actors still want to attract a wide public awareness which is usually only realized through mass media attention. On the other hand, they usually aim at incorporating as many citizens as possible in collective action and give them chances to express their views in emails, blogs, mailing lists or in other forms of interactivity. While the Internet structure supports a more decentralized, egalitarian, and direct civic participation, the success of political campaigning strategies still highly depends on a campaign logic that requires a more centralist approach to politics, aiming at mass media audiences based on the mobilizing power of large, professionalized organizational actors.

For a long time, literature on the political potential of the Internet has exaggerated its capability to transform the political culture of representative democracies in terms of strengthening responsive and interactive modes of political participation.⁵ Great hopes of democratizing political and social systems through technological changes have meanwhile turned into sobering experiences. Individual citizens, as much as political organizations, can benefit from the Internet when it comes to gathering and spreading information or to collaborate with other citizens or organizations. However, the interactive dimension of Internet communication is still underdeveloped as far as political campaigning is concerned. The asymmetry of power between campaigning organizations and individual supporters has not been significantly decreased since the introduction of new ICTs.

5 The literature has spawned varying positions in this context, for an overview see Gibson et al. (2004: 6-7).

If web campaigning is not significantly diminishing the problem of a top-down structure of political campaigning, to what extent can it contribute to confront the problem of segmentation of the democratic public? The danger of fragmentation of the public sphere, its disintegration into an uncountable number of more or less connected issue-publics (Sunstein 2002), seems to be less dire, as is often assumed, given the manifold links between campaigning websites and the hub function of commercial as well as independent news platforms. The *reintermediarization* of Internet communication through web activities of political parties, interest groups and particularly of large networks of civil society actors counteracts the often-mentioned risk of *cyberbalkanization* of web-based *nanoaudiences* (Kahn/Kellner 2005). The web sphere is a “contested terrain, used by left, right, and centre of both dominant cultures and subcultures to promote their own agendas and interests” (ibid.). It offers new options of for all kinds of campaigning: electoral campaigning of political parties, information, and image campaigns of governments as well as action campaigns of unions and solidarity campaigns of civil society actors. Powerful actors can increase their public influence and pressure by creatively combining mass media and Internet strategies; but also more resource poor interest groups and civil society actors can benefit from the new option to reach a wider audience for their claims. However, web campaigning does not solve the problem of undemocratic top-town structure of political campaigning. Web-based campaigns are still strategic forms of collective action and far apart from the ideal of discursive, communicative action envisaged in notions of deliberative democracy.

All in all, web-based political campaigns offer more options for political participation and dialogical interaction among supporters as well as between organizational campaign actors and individual supporters. Web campaigning can be more democratic than traditional mass media by widening the array of publicly articulated opinions by fully using the co-productive, interactive tools of Internet communication. Apart from that, it allows for a transnationalization of political mobilization and opinion formation that is much more adequate to the risks and political challenges resulting from an accelerated denationalization of economic markets and processes of a transformation of the nation-state.

Overview of the Chapters

The aim of this volume,⁶ therefore, is to examine both opportunities and problems of political campaigning on the web by considering a range of key actors within liberal democracies – executive government bodies, political parties, lobbying groups, trade unions, social movements – within different (trans)national contexts. Before providing empirical insights, the book theoretically discusses the concept of public sphere with regard to political campaigning on the web in the first part *General Reflections on Political Campaigning on the Web*. By taking cyber protest and net activism into account, *Jeffrey Wimmer* differentiates between alternative, participatory, and media activists' counter-public spheres. Political campaigns initialized by non-established political actors on the Internet, he argues, are not part of a unitary counter-public sphere. Particularly due to the widespread use of new media, he calls for a concept of counter-public spheres in plural in order to detect the political efficiency of web campaigning. In line with this, he argues that the analysis of connection of different levels of public communication through web campaigning is necessary to understand the shifting dividing lines between public and counter-public spheres. Drawing on media and cultural studies, *Rainer Winter* traces the transnational dimension of counter-public sphere(s), which build an opposition to dominant cultures and provide moments of self-empowerment. He emphasizes the significance of an active, creative use of new media in political campaigns and digital resistance. According to Winter, the use of tactical online media and the constitution of (virtual) aesthetic communities bear potential to contribute to a revitalization of democracy but need to be traced in cultural practices and the habits of everyday life.

The following section, *Appropriation on the Web*, assesses how different political actors are using the World Wide Web in order to realize their specific campaigning goals and functions. Overall the chapters suggest that political actors and institutions are still at the stage of experimenting with the new technology. The chapter by *Sarah Zielmann and Ulrike Röttger* outlines characteristics and developments of political parties' and presidential web campaigning. Focusing on Germany, France, United Kingdom, and the United States, they highlight differences between these countries in terms of the *when* and the *how* the potential of the Internet was appropriated for campaigning, defining the US as a first-mover and France ascribed as being still relatively unacquainted. The authors see particular opportunities for web campaigning to support offline efforts, e.g. fundraising, though they emphasize the problem of

6 The editors wish to thank Kenzie Burchell, Henrike Libal, and Franziska Liebig for their valuable assistance within the editorial process of this volume.

restricted access for small parties due to the need of costly expertise for online activities in the age of professionalized public relations. Looking at executive and legislative governmental bodies, the chapters by *Johanna Niesyto* as well as *Lorenzo Mosca and Daria Santucci* focus on web campaigning in the context of the European Union (EU). Exemplifying the EU campaign *European Year of Equal Opportunities for All*, Niesyto argues that this governmental solidarity campaign on the web does not fully utilize the reinvigorating potentials provided by web technology. Based on her analysis, however, she identifies reshaped campaign characteristics, such as a (partial) withdrawal of political actors in favour of the individual *netizens* to communicate their own positive judgements on the campaign's universalistic claim in order to support the governmental activities. By taking the European Parliament's *Committee on Petitions* as an example, Mosca and Santucci critically analyze the role of e-petitioning in political web campaigns, especially as a means for bottom-up participation. The authors also discuss its potential in empowering citizens to conduct their own web campaign, but also its limited usability and effectiveness.

Dealing with civil society actors, the following chapters consider both the appropriation of the Internet by rather resource-weak actors such as grassroots activists as well as institutionalized actors with higher resources. With regard to the latter, *Stuart Hodkinson* discusses Internet-supported labour campaigning and points to general opportunities and obstacles of web campaigning. Hodkinson considers the transnational scope of Internet communication as a major chance to foster transnational solidarity. Constraints, however, are seen in the digital divide as well as in language barriers. Concerning these barriers, he outlines the positive role of intermediary actors such as *Babels* for transnational communication. Overall, he sees a qualitative and quantitative shift through ICT appropriation for enabling inclusivity, responsiveness, and internationalism. Nevertheless, he concludes that the real obstacles to internationalism cannot be resolved by using the Internet since they are political in nature. By drawing on empirical findings based upon the research project *Changing Protest and Media Cultures* at the University of Siegen, Germany, *Veronika Kneip* compares anti-corporate campaigns conducted by trade unions, NGOs and grassroots activists. In examining how these different actors use the Internet as a 'weapon' she refers to tensions between campaign designs and the use of Internet technology. Though her analysis shows each campaign approach is reflected in a particular manner of web use, Kneip states that centred campaign approaches are partially opened by the introduction of interactive elements and decentred campaign actions are bundled via websites. Also from a qualitative perspective, *Alice Mattoni's* contribution analyzes grassroots campaigning with the example of the *Euro Mayday Campaign*. Her case study underlines the significance of the so called *encounter level* for protest campaigning in particular,

and for a Europeanization of public sphere, in general. Furthermore, Mattoni draws the conclusion that chances and challenges of the Internet might be constituted differently at national and transnational level since web technology affects more the organizational process of the protest campaign at the national level and at the transnational level it affects more identification processes.

In the last part, *Subsumption and Outlook*, Ralf Lindner presents a comprehensive analysis of campaigns conducted by various political actors such as parties, unions, and protest alliances in Canada in order to define differences and similarities in Internet use by intermediary actors. He suggests a correlation between the organizations' views of democracy and certain online-communication practices. Finally, Geert Lovink will reflect in an interview, conducted by Jobanna Niesyto, the offered theoretical implications as well as the empirical findings in the book and set them in the broader context of Internet politics and technologies: Are we entering a new era of political communication? Lovink remains sceptical about the chances of the empowerment of the individual through political web campaigning and criticizes lifestyle politics mirrored in web campaigns. Similar to Winter, he pleads for a more active and creative use of the Internet in order to connect people transnationally beyond the 'rhetoric' of solidarity. Overall, Lovink calls for experiments being grounded on the reflection of early ideas such as open software or open content in order to use the web more effectively for political web campaigning.

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