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# Mundane internet tools, mobilizing practices, and the coproduction of citizenship in political campaigns

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## Abstract

The internet's potential for political mobilization has been highlighted for more than a decade, but we know little about what particular *kinds* of information and communication technologies are most important when it comes to getting people involved in politics and about what this means for the active exercise of engaged citizenship. On the basis of ethnographic research in two congressional campaigns in the USA, I will argue that specific *mundane internet tools* (like email) are much more deeply integrated into mobilizing practices today than *emerging tools* (like social networking sites) and *specialized tools* (like campaign websites). Campaigns' reliance on mundane internet tools challenges the prevalent idea that sophisticated 'hypermedia' turn people into 'managed citizens'. Instead, I suggest we theorize internet-assisted activism as a process for the *coproduction of citizenship* and recognize how dependent even well-funded political organizations are on the wider built communications environment and today's relatively open internet.

## Keywords

activism, campaigns, citizenship, civic engagement, elections, ethnography, information and communication technologies, internet, participant-observation, political participation

## Introduction

'I don't believe much in websites.' That was the blunt reply of the 20-something volunteer coordinator in one congressional campaign when I asked him about the role of the internet in his job. 'But I don't know what people did before the internet.' In this article, I present an analysis that reconciles his dismissal of the state-of-the-art website his campaign had invested almost 40 thousand dollars in with his second comment, which

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underlines how integral a wider range of internet tools have become to mobilizing practices today. In post-industrial democracies in particular, political assemblages ranging from mainstream electoral campaigns to radical social movements rely on a growing number of digital and networked technologies in their everyday activities – tools ranging from mundane applications like email over emerging social networking platforms to professionally-designed and often expensive specialized websites. During the 2008 elections in the USA, competitive campaigns for federal office, like the ones I analyse here, were not simply *on* the web – the internet was deeply *in* them too. Websites like MyBarackObama.com are only the most visible parts of a much larger array of internet tools integral to many different campaign practices, from fundraising and public relations to the area I focus on here – mobilization; attempts by consultants, staffers, and already engaged volunteers to get people to join the three to four percent of the adult population who have worked to help candidates or campaigns win elections in recent cycles. I analyse mobilizing practices to advance our understanding of what the plethora of internet tools available, and in actual use, means for political participation, for how we understand the active exercise of citizenship, and for campaigns operating in a changing communications environment.

In the 15 years since Senator Dianne Feinstein became the first American elected official to have a presence online, the number of internet tools available has grown enormously. To give just one example, John Edwards' campaign in the Democratic presidential primary in 2008 not only had a website and a host of online-integrated back-end tools, plus a Facebook presence, a MySpace profile, and videos on YouTube. It also used Flickr, 43Things, Ning, MetaCafe, Revver, Yahoo! 360 degrees, BlipTV, vSocial, Tagworld, CollectiveX, Bebo, Care2, Essembly, Hi5, Xanga, Gather, Del.icio.us, and no doubt many more sites – and still failed to show the flag on several others, including Orkut, LinkedIn, Meebo, myLife, myYearbook, and BlackPlanet. This multitude of internet tools presents a challenge for researchers. While academics, elected officials, and new media professionals alike have for a long time highlighted that the internet has a mobilizing *potential* that may help campaigns and prospective volunteers connect, and thus increase levels of political participation and afford more engaged citizenship (Bimber and Davis, 2003; Chadwick, 2006; Foot and Schneider, 2006), we know little about what kinds of tools are involved in actual mobilizing *practices* and what that means. As another young campaign staffer complained to me, 'to the older folks; it is all just "the internet"'. But in practice, people do not use 'the internet'. They use specific tools for specific purposes with specific implications.

On the basis of an analytical approach adopted from science and technology studies and data from 10 months of ethnographic fieldwork in two congressional districts in the USA, this article presents a close analysis of what kinds of internet tools are actually used in mobilizing practices in political campaigns. By identifying the particular kinds of tools most important for getting people involved as volunteers, I reframe our understanding of the internet-assisted exercise of active citizenship. My argument is that when it comes to mobilization, *mundane internet tools* like email and search are more important than *emerging tools* (like social networking sites) or *specialized tools* (like campaign websites). Insistence on the continuing relevance of apparently banal and often-overlooked tools like email and search engines may not have quite the rhetorical flourish of

the breathless announcement of the arrival of the 'YouTube Election' (Lizza, 2006) or the 'Facebook Election' (Sullivan, 2008) that seem to accompany every new and novel application put to political use. But this empirical finding challenges the idea that new 'hypermedia' allow political operatives across the post-industrial world to reduce people to 'managed citizens' (Howard, 2006). I will suggest instead that we theorize internet-assisted mobilizing practices in democratic politics as processes that afford the *coproduction of citizenship*. Political campaigns are pre-structured by staffers with an almost entirely instrumental view of citizen engagement and with privileged access to some tools and resources, but the basis of volunteer involvement continues to be overlapping and sometimes complementary interests and aspirations, and the most important technologies used today are the mundane internet tools that most people can access and use on their own – tools political operatives do not control, just as they do not control those who get involved. Campaign staffers sometimes refer to volunteers as 'bodies', but their interactions with them suggest that they are not quite that docile, just as the older volunteers who occasionally call staffers 'the kids' rarely get away with treating them as such. Analysis of ethnographic evidence reveals campaigns as sites where different communities interact with the help of shared tools and negotiate their different roles without anyone assuming full control of the situation.

The first part of this article outlines the analytical approach adopted, focused on internet-assisted mobilizing practices understood as socio-technical processes and conceptualizing citizenship in democratic politics as coproduced. In the second part, I present the research design and data, which goes beyond website analysis and relies on ethnographic participant-observation in two congressional districts in the United States, interviews with a wider range of consultants, campaign staffers, and volunteers, and additional online and offline secondary sources. I then go on to outline the inductively-generated and relational empirical typology of mundane, emerging, and specialized internet tools offered here, and analyse each kind of tool in turn. Finally, I discuss the wider implications the central role mundane internet tools have for how we understand the connection between mobilizing practices and the constitution of active citizenship in American campaigns.

## **Analysing internet tools and mobilizing practices**

My analytical focus here is on internet tools as parts of mobilizing practices, specifically understood as the work that goes into trying to get people to volunteer for political campaigns (a somewhat narrower definition of mobilization than the one used by Foot and Schneider, 2006). While socio-economic status, individual levels of political interest, and people's relative position in social networks and associational life continue to be powerful predictors of propensity to get involved in campaigns, recent work in both political science and sociology underlines that mobilizing practices *themselves* are of independent importance in accounting for political participation (McAdam et al., 2001; Verba et al., 1995). The staffers and volunteers I did my research among spent countless hours identifying potential participants, recruiting them, and maintaining relationships with them, and we know from the social science literature that it *matters* – people are simply much more likely to work for a campaign (or join a civic association, or take part in a movement) if someone asks them to.

To put it bluntly, for many years, few did so. This fact is crucial for understanding the relation between internet tools and mobilizing practices. In the course of what Theda Skocpol (2003) has called the 'civic transformation', many of the trans-local civic associations that have traditionally mobilized ordinary citizens to play a part in public life in the United States changed their emphasis from mass membership to centralized management. Political parties followed a similar path. By the 1990s, campaign staffers allegedly turned people away when they came to volunteer, because they saw no use for these 'amateurs' (Weir and Ganz, 1997). Comparable trends have been observed across the post-industrial world (see e.g., Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000). In such a setting, where powerful elites and their retainers think they have no clear interest in getting people involved in politics, the 'mobilizing potential' of the internet will remain potential, or at least matter mostly in so far as the technologies work in ways that circumvent central institutions (for instance by making relevant information available), or if the potential is actualized by extra-institutional actors (social movements and the like).

But in recent election cycles, consultants and staffers involved in campaigns in the United States seems to have come around to the idea of mobilizing people for political purposes, and have begun to aggressively try to realize the internet's mobilizing potential. The early years of the 21st century has seen a strong resurgent interest in what I have elsewhere called 'personalized political communication' (Nielsen, 2010), attempts to cut through the clutter of advertisements, commercially-produced news, and direct mail through the use of *people as media*. To mobilize the thousands of people necessary to pursue an effective 'ground war', American campaigns have today adopted a wide range of internet tools in what some have suggested may amount to a transformation of the logistical 'back-end' of electoral politics (Hindman, 2008; Vaccari, 2008). Volunteers are no longer turned away, but actively invited to participate in certain instrumentally useful ways.

To analyse these changes, identify the internet tools most important for political mobilization, and on that basis assess what they mean for how we understand citizenship today, I adopt an approach developed in science and technology studies but rarely used in the study of internet politics. I look at mobilization not as an outcome correlated with various social characteristics, individual attributes, or reported levels of technology use, but as a set of situated socio-technical practices through which campaigns are expanded beyond the core organization populated by paid staffers and grow into wider assemblages that involve, among other things, willing volunteers – all in the pursuit of shared political goals (Beunza and Stark, 2004; Foot and Schneider, 2006; Latour, 1987; Nielsen, 2009). In politics, as elsewhere, the internet is increasingly integrated into everyday life, and its various permutations should be understood as they are adopted and developed in this context (Barney, 2000; Wellman and Haythornthwaite, 2002). Conceptualizing mobilization as a set of practices (rather than an outcome), and internet technologies as a set of tools available to, and adopted and developed by, people (rather than as an external variable) help me unpack campaigns, the technologies they use, and ultimately political participation itself, and thus allows me to address the question of what kinds of tools are actually central to mobilization, and what this in turn means for how we conceive of citizenship.

From this perspective, we can think of citizenship itself not simply as a status and a set of rights, but as an active, technologically-assisted, political engagement with the

world (Latour and Weibel, 2005; Mossberger et al., 2008). The role of an active citizen is, in short, one people assume by socio-technical means (even if not under conditions of their own choosing) – whether in political campaigns, in social movements, or elsewhere. Historical sociologists have already shown how the actual practice and dominant understandings of what it means to be a ‘good citizen’ and what people become part of when they take part in politics have changed dramatically over time (Schudson, 1998). These changes are at least in part intertwined with the adoption and development of new technologies and campaign practices. Citizenship in this active, practical sense is constituted in campaign settings through the interplay between political operatives, volunteers, and the different technologies they rely on.

Close observation of the role of internet tools in everyday mobilizing practices suggests that contemporary political organizations are rarely the cutting-edge ‘hypermedia campaigns’ that consultants like to tell journalists and researchers about in interviews. In fact, campaigns depend on a wide range of internet tools in their relations with their surroundings, and most of these tools are increasingly mundane, not developed specifically for political purposes, and equally available to staffers and volunteers. This seemingly simple empirical point has important theoretical ramifications for how we understand the exercise of active, engaged citizenship today. So far, our understanding of citizen involvement in internet-assisted electoral campaigns has been developed around analysis of a limited set of sophisticated and exclusive back-end technologies for voter identification and volunteer management (see in particular Howard, 2006 and Kreiss, 2009). These control-oriented specialized internet tools are said to reduce people to ‘managed citizens’, in Philip N. Howard’s phrase. Theoretically, this take on citizenship has been developed partially on the basis of Michel Foucault’s notion of ‘governmentality’, processes by which people *are constituted* as social and political subjects in ways that render them ‘governable’ (1998a). What has been missing from these empirical analyses is symmetrical attention to the rest of the internet tools involved in campaign practices – the more or less openly available mundane and emerging ones that both staffers and volunteers also rely on – and to the perspective of activists themselves. The managed citizenship thesis with its focus on control has as a consequence failed to take into account what we, with a phrase from Foucault’s later work, might call internet-assisted ‘technologies of the self’, socio-technical processes by which people *constitute themselves* as individual subjects (1998b).

By taking into account not only the specialized technologies of control that staffers employ, but also the more distributed emerging and mundane tools that staffers *and* volunteers use to engage with each other, we can arrive at a more nuanced understanding of citizenship and the everyday practices of internet politics, just as Foucault in his later work arrived at a fuller understanding of power by reintroducing the kinds of subjectivity he had ignored in his early work. Citizen engagement in electoral politics is not simply the product of campaign staffers and the specialized tools at their disposal, but also of the willing involvement of volunteers who connect with political organizations using a much wider range of internet tools, some of which are widely used and more or less equally available. I suggest we theorize mobilization in such socio-technical contexts as the ‘coproduction’ of citizenship. In the rest of this article, I demonstrate how this approach affords a better understanding of what kinds of internet tools are actually used to

mobilize the people who get involved in electoral campaigns, and what the shared repertoire of largely mundane technologies means for how people can act as citizens.

## Research design and data

My argument is based primarily on a two-case minimal variation comparative ethnography of campaign assemblages, organized around the campaign organizations Jim Himes: Democrat for Congress (in Connecticut's 4th Congressional District) and Linda Stender for Congress (in New Jersey's 7th Congressional District). I did 10 months of fieldwork in these districts as a participant-observer from February 2008 until Election Day in November the same year. More than a hundred field trips resulted in over a thousand pages of field notes based on observation and on informal conversations with dozens of campaign staffers and hundreds of volunteers. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations come from my on-site fieldwork. In addition, I carried out 59 semi-structured interviews, mostly with people involved directly in the two campaigns at hand, but also more than a dozen with leading political internet consultants from across the USA. On top of this, I mapped both campaigns' web presence and archived email communications and the like. The dataset is part of a larger project analysing contemporary campaign practices.

Ethnographic data has several advantages over interview-based research and website analysis, and the need for more participant-observation-based research on internet politics and campaigns more generally has been noted by several authors (Foot and Schneider, 2006; Howard, 2006). Where interviews provide data on what people say and what they say they do, participant-observation provides primary data on what they actually do – data that in this article lead me to suggest we reconsider the rather grandiose claims some political internet consultants make about the tools they sell and their ability to manipulate and activate citizens almost at will. Whereas website analysis is a central and necessary component of the wider internet politics research agenda, it remains a media-centric method, which should be supplemented with observational data when one wants to analyse the role of internet elements in situated socio-technical practices that blur conventional distinctions between online and offline activity – such as the mobilizing work I study here.

The two cases analysed in this article were chosen strategically in advance, and entry was obtained early in 2008 so that I could follow them all the way to Election Day. My objective was to get access to well-funded campaigns involved in close and high-stakes elections, but ones that I had no *a priori* reasons to expect would adopt particularly idiosyncratic or innovative strategies. Both were serious and hard-fought, but not exceptional, campaigns. This fact is methodologically important, since many case studies in internet politics, whether of electoral campaigns or social movements, focus on online mobilizations that in retrospect appear extraordinarily successful – for example around Howard Dean or the so-called 'battle for Seattle'. This article, in contrast, deliberately focuses on two quite ordinary campaigns – similar enough that I will treat them together. While wider generalizations remain tentative, since both of my cases were Democratic campaigns in the United States (fieldwork is based on trust, and hence difficult to do across the partisan divide), the commonalities identified between the two of them still provides a solid foundation for a basic argument about the relative importance of mundane internet

tools in mobilizing practices, and the coproduction of citizenship, even if this will remain a hypothesis when it comes to campaigns less like the ones studied here.

## **An empirical typology of internet tools in mobilizing practices**

A first step towards an analysis consisted in simply recording how often I saw staffers and volunteers use particular internet tools, and how often in conversations and interviews they told me that certain technologies were important parts of their everyday work in the campaign. But to move beyond a simple enumeration of the technologies of the moment and their roles in mobilizing people in two soon-to-be forgotten campaigns in 2008, I categorize them as *mundane*, *emerging*, and *specialized* internet tools. This empirical typology is developed here on the basis of coding of the appearances different technologies make in my field notes. The categories are relational and relative to actual patterns of use. Particular internet tools are mundane, emerging, and specialized tools for someone, at some point in time, in some setting. The same technology can be mundane for one person in one place, and emerging for another elsewhere. Some tools are openly available and widely used (like email), others openly available but still far from being used by everyone (as social networking sites were in 2008), and some are only available to select insiders or the few who buy them (such as specialized database technology). We have little solid data on how often people interface with specialized tools in politics, but Table 1 provides an overview of how often Americans in different age groups used some of the tools I categorize as mundane (email and search) and emerging (social networking sites and online video) in 2008. While sites like MySpace, YouTube, and Facebook were already then increasingly mundane to many under the age of 30, they remained more emerging among older cohorts. The data in Table 1 is not specific to politics, but gives a more general sense of who uses what tools and how often, and how much variation exists in people's online habits. In the future, new tools will surely qualify as mundane, just as some will disappear off the radar.

It is in forging a more precise theoretical and empirical connection between the much-vaunted but ultimately abstract 'mobilizing potential' of the internet, and the many different tools involved, the aggregate variations in how many people use them (documented by surveys), and the various actual mobilizing practices observed in the campaigns analysed, that the typology developed here is useful. It helps us to sort out patterns of use and group the dozens of different tools involved in ways that correspond to their relative practical importance, and on that basis their wider theoretical significance. Different kinds of tools are used differently, are available and familiar to different people, and afford different things. It is when we appreciate these internal variations in levels and kinds of use that the relative importance of mundane internet tools for mobilizing practices and the exercise of citizenship become apparent, and the implications of emergent and specialized tools emerge in a different light. I will now go through each kind of tool in turn.

### **Mundane internet tools**

Mundane tools are all around us, often naturalized as parts of a built communications environment that we take for granted in everyday life. Picking up the phone, you do not

**Table 1.** Differences in online activities (%). Adapted from Pew Internet & American Life Project (2008)

	Teens (12–17)	Generation 'Y' (18–32)	Generation 'X' (33–44)	Younger Boomers (45–54)	Older Boomers (55–63)	Silent Generation (64–72)	G.I. Generation (73+)	All online adults
Go online	93	87	82	79	70	56	31	74
Mundane tools								
Use email	73	94	93	90	90	91	79	91
Use search engines	*	90	93	90	89	85	70	89
Emerging tools								
Use social networking sites	65	67	36	20	9	11	4	35
Watch videos online	57	72	57	49	30	24	14	52

\* No teen data for this activity.

doubt that it is connected. Opening your computer, you assume that you can send an email. Mundane tools are like cars, ordinary not in the sense that everyone has one or that anyone could build one, but in that they are commonplace. Paying attention to the details of what staffers and volunteers *actually do* as they work together reveals that mundane internet tools are involved everywhere when campaigns try to recruit and maintain relationships with volunteers. Email, search engines, and external websites are the clearest examples of mundane internet elements involved in mobilizing practices, and I will deal with each in turn.<sup>1</sup>

Once a volunteer has been identified and successfully recruited, the staffers and activists who work to maintain the relationship that keeps them involved start to push many interactions, from time-consuming and sometimes ambiguous individual face-to-face and phone conversations to quick and standardized computer-mediated platforms. Instead of making a reminder call, for the first time someone is scheduled to come in, a volunteer will be told: 'I'm going to email you the details, ok?' The advantages are clear for both staffers and volunteers: an email can spell out details about locations and time more clearly than a rushed phone call from a busy campaign office, they can be copied and pasted and sent quickly to many, and they do not require that the receiver take an incoming call here and now or is physically present. When asked how she kept in touch with the campaign, one volunteer explained: 'they rarely pick up the phone, so I usually stop by the office or shoot [the volunteer coordinator] an email'.

Even in the recruitment of volunteers, once a staffer – always busy and eager to get on to make the next call or whatever other task awaits – has a sense that someone has been effectively roped in, they will begin to unload on mundane internet tools what would, over the phone or in person, be time-consuming verbal communication, and encourage people to fill in the blanks themselves. They may take time to discuss policy with a volunteer during their first encounter, but in the everyday humdrum of a campaign office, people interested in additional information about the very candidate they are working for are often referred to search engines and online information: 'why don't you look it up on the website?' 'Check out her [State] Assembly page, I'm sure it has her position.' As relations move beyond recruitment, it is assumed that volunteers are familiar with and capable of searching: 'If you just go to Google, and type in "Linda Stender", you'll find us.' Search engines are here enrolled to orient volunteers in information that staffers and activists would otherwise have to spend valuable time conveying.

This points to the third mundane tool that is taken for granted in mobilizing practices, namely a large population of websites 'out there' with information about the candidate and his or her past, about allies, about upcoming events, and about the technical details of the electoral process (to name a few examples). Again, even in interactions with volunteers physically *in* the office of a particular candidate wanting to know if the aspiring public servant would attend this or that event, the reliance on external tools is remarkable: 'Have you tried checking out their website?' In conjunction with search, the existence of a large number of websites with relevant information as parts of the built communications environment allow staffers and activists to externalize tasks that could divert them from the mobilizing work they should be doing, to displace some of the 'burden' of informing volunteers onto the mundane tools we use to navigate the web.

So even though they are rarely discussed, mundane internet tools play an important part in mobilizing practices, easing some tasks, freeing up more time for others, being integral to almost all. It is email, search engines, and the existing universe of websites that the volunteer coordinator quoted in the introduction spoke of when he said that he did not know what people did before the internet. These are the mundane internet tools he, his colleagues, and the volunteers rely on, and their work would be very different without them. They are integral to what people do, as illustrated above, and as shown by the problems that begin when they do not work. Failure can be observed empirically on a routine basis: a lost internet connection or temporary technological problems with an important mundane tool like email – or the dreaded Google error message ‘The server encountered a temporary error and could not complete your request. Please try again in 30 seconds’ – has an effect on a campaign office akin to a kick to an ant hill. People start milling around, many cannot do what they are supposed to do or complete what they were in the middle of, and much time and effort has to be spent to reinstate the usual state of affairs – tech support is called, called again, and the tensions in the air is palpable. The constant reliance on mundane internet tools is one side of the evidence for their importance in mobilizing practices. The paralysis that threatens when they fail or are unavailable is the other.

### Emerging internet tools

While mundane internet tools are pervasive and integral to mobilizing practices, emerging tools – such as social networking sites – seemed largely peripheral in the two campaigns I followed. If mundane tools are like a car today to us, emergent tools are those that appear to all but early adopters as horseless carriages. They may one day become mundane, familiar, and intuitively useful, but they remain as of yet novel, strange, and for most seem to be of dubious instrumental value. I will focus here on the use of three of the most high-profile emerging tools of the 2008 electoral cycle, the trio of MySpace, YouTube, and Facebook.

MySpace is most easily disposed of in this discussion. Despite the fact that it was the second-most popular social networking site in the United States in 2008, particularly popular with teenagers, neither campaign maintained a presence there. (This is just one of many dogs that did not bark. Congressional campaigns make literally hundreds of thousands of phone calls. Yet neither campaign used VoIP (Voice over IP) services like Skype.) Some of the younger staffers and activists did use MySpace themselves, and did communicate *within* the campaign with each other using this tool (as they did with instant messaging (IM) services), but it played no discernable role in their mobilizing practices. In this sense, it was but one of several tools used for basically social purposes, for organizing outings and events after work, but not to identify, recruit, or maintain relationships with volunteers.

It may seem strange to include the video-sharing site YouTube in a discussion of mobilizing, as it seems to be better suited for (more or less viral) public relations than for volunteer engagement. Indeed, both campaigns did post their television advertisements as the video streaming equivalent of ‘shovelware’, plus a few clips of footage of their respective candidates speaking at various events. I bring it up here because it has been suggested that YouTube – like blogs and email lists – offer campaigns a back channel

through which they can communicate with their supporters, explain strategy, show some of the inner workings of the organization, and reiterate their calls for help (Lutz, 2009). The Barack Obama campaign, for example, experimented with this in 2008. Neither of the campaigns analysed here engaged in such practices, using YouTube more for media and message than for mobilization.

Whereas both campaigns ignored MySpace and used YouTube very little, they both established supporter groups on Facebook early on. When I asked the volunteer coordinator in one campaign how many volunteers they had recruited via social networks like Facebook, he just laughed at my question. When I asked the online communications director in the other campaign, he said 'few'. He then added that he thought these tools were mainly used by a hard core of people already deeply involved in the campaign in many other ways. During the election season, each campaign built core volunteer communities of about 300 to 400 people. Supporter lists served as fodder for the identification of potential volunteers throughout the campaign season, though the online communications director in one of the campaigns, and the volunteer coordinator in the other, were quick to point out that most of those who had announced their support on Facebook had already been recruited by the campaign when they did so. This was confirmed in conversations with volunteers. Three commonalities stand out about how Facebook groups were used in the two campaigns. First, in both cases, only the campaign staff posted things on the wall, and their activity generated almost no comments. The group remained a site for one-way communication from the campaign to a few already-involved supporters. Secondly, though some events (rallies, volunteer canvasses, debate watching parties, small-dollar fundraisers, etc) were added to the calendar on the two groups, the updating was erratic and incomplete. Thirdly, in both campaigns, the Facebook group had no clearly defined role in the mobilizing process. They were created and maintained by the communications staff, and only intermittently utilized for mobilizing purposes. A volunteer said, 'I sort of like that people can see I'm a fan of [Himes on Facebook], but I can't recall that I've gotten any information from the campaign that way.'

In short, the politicians' 'invasion' of MySpace, YouTube, and Facebook that was forecast in 2006 (Keen, 2006) has yet to happen. They are there, but they are not doing very much. At least when it comes to mobilizing practices, emerging tools seem largely inconsequential, and remain extraneous to the campaign effort. When one of these sites does not work for some reason, it means, to quote one staffer, 'nothing at all'. This does not mean that emerging tools serve no purpose, as they may for example contribute to message and even generate some media coverage by signaling that the campaign is 'hip' and well-versed in new technologies (Foot and Schneider, 2006). But in terms of the everyday work of the campaign, they play a bigger role in the social life of staffers and core activists than in mobilizing practices, and this is likely to change only insofar as these tools *become* mundane.

## Specialized internet tools

Unlike mundane and emerging tools, specialized tools are controlled by an individual or organizational user and dedicated to a particular purpose. Specialized tools are typically bought from external vendors or developed internally. Some of them are familiar (like

mundane tools) to users, some of them more exotic (like emerging tools). But regardless of whether they are humdrum or not, they are not for everyone. To extend the analogy made to automobile technologies, specialized tools are more like bobcats than cars or horseless carriages. They may make sense to us, but few have them and use them. Depending on the particular specialized internet tool and its purpose, the front-end may be open to the wider online user population, but back-end access and the ability to reconfigure and customize the tool is typically restrained. Examples from the corporate world would include e-commerce and online banking. Bigger and more ambitious campaigns (in the 2008 presidential primaries and general election, for instance) have experimented with a wide range of specialized tools, perhaps most prominently in-house social networking platforms like MyBarackObama.com and its various less successful siblings. But the number of specialized tools dedicated to politics remains limited, because the sums spent on internet politics are modest, even in the United States. In the campaigns I focus on here, the most important specialized tools used in mobilizing practices were the campaign websites themselves and the Democratic Party's online-accessible national voter file ('VoteBuilder') with an interface for targeting and organizing that is called the Voter Activation Network, in daily conversations shortened to 'the VAN'.

Both campaigns I researched had professionally-designed websites provided by external vendors, including in one case the Democratic market-leader Blue State Digital. The campaign websites were partly online representations of the campaign in the traditional sense (with a few briefs on issues and a little bio of the candidate, plus lots of photos and good feelings all around), and partly hubs, integrating a wider online presence and the various mundane and emerging tools used (an invitation to sign up for an email newsletter, links to their YouTube channels, to their Facebook groups, etc). In addition to these other purposes, they were explicitly presented as mobilizing tools, prominently displaying the, by now obligatory, invitation for people to 'get involved!' The sites had forms for people interested in volunteering to fill out, events calendars, and calls for help for specific activities like rallies or weekend canvasses, all accompanied by the usual rhetoric about the importance of grassroots engagement. Towards the end of one of the campaigns I followed, I asked the online communications director how many volunteers they had recruited via their state-of-the-art website, and he estimated 'about 300'. A field organizer who overheard the conversation joined in unprompted, pointing out that that meant that a *list* of 300 had come from the site, and with the usual recruitment rate of about 10 percent, that would translate into no more than around 30 volunteers. This is relative to the over 1000 people who were in to help out at one point or other during that particular campaign, and to the core community of around 300 activists who came in regularly to help out. The websites played a minimal role in the campaigns' mobilizing practices, as recognized by the lack of faith expressed in the opening quote of this article. The same volunteer coordinator also told me, 'I realize we have to have [a website], but I don't think it helps me.' In the other campaign, the online communications director did faithfully forward names whenever someone did in fact sign up on the website to volunteer, but, as he confided 'I'm not sure where those names actually go.' They did in fact make it onto various lists, but, as a field organizer in the same campaign explained to me, 'when I am trying to work my way methodically through a pool of potential recruits, I'm not going to go out of my way to try to track down some random person just because he

has signed up online.’ The turnaround time from someone signing up online to them hearing back from the campaign could be long, sometimes several months, a fact that staffers recognized and volunteers often complained about. The websites that extended the invitation for people to ‘get involved’, and ‘join the team!’ were in the end of limited importance in the actual mobilizing practices of these campaigns. A volunteer told me: ‘I don’t use the website, really. If I can’t get through to [the staffers] on the phone, I send a mail or stop by the office.’

The Voter Activation Network/VoteBuilder is the other online-integrated specialized tool involved in mobilizing practices. ‘The VAN’, as it is called, provides individual campaigns with online access to a detailed voter database through a user-friendly dashboard that allows even inexperienced staffers and volunteers to make use of the information amassed. The VAN is mainly used for targeting purposes, and formats the various call lists, walk sheets, and turf maps that campaigns provide paid part-timers and volunteers with when they engage in personalized political communication, contacting voters at home at the door or on the phone. In terms of mobilization, its most important role is in identifying potential recruits, but even here, there is little evidence of impact. In both campaigns, the field directors would, when they fell short of volunteer recruitment goals, use the VAN to build lists of people who vote regularly and were believed to be consistently partisan Democrats. Staffers and activists were then asked to call through these lists of total strangers, who had never expressed any interest in volunteering for the campaigns. This was not popular work, since people were often less than enthused by being cold-called, and the results were extremely meager. One field organizer confided that she ‘hated’ making recruitment calls from lists generated by the VAN. A volunteer asked to make calls of these lists refused to do so, saying ‘Oh no, I did that last time, you are not going to fool me with those again. Give me something else to do.’

All in all, the various specialized internet tools employed by the campaigns were of central importance to many aspects of their work, but not their mobilizing practices. Errors in or even momentary loss of access to NGP or the VAN were nightmares for finance staffers and canvassing directors, but of little importance to volunteer coordinators and others trying to recruit people. For this, the campaigns relied mostly on mundane internet tools.

### **Mundane internet tools and the coproduction of citizenship**

The centrality of mundane internet tools, as opposed to the successive generations of emerging and specialized tools that have been lionized by various observers, problematizes the idea that what some call ‘hypermedia’ allow political operatives to turn people into ‘managed citizens’ (Howard, 2006). While it is doubtlessly true that well into the so-called ‘information age’ many people continue to be ill-informed about public affairs and exercise their citizenship only in the ‘thinnest’ of ways – by voting, and sometimes not even that – millions of people volunteer for parties and candidates every election cycle in the United States and elsewhere. These people increasingly connect with campaigns via widely available mundane internet tools. They enter into pre-structured settings oriented towards the pursuit of electoral victory, and, in recent years, increasingly desperate for manpower to pursue labour-intensive ‘ground war’ operations and engage

in personalized political communication. But they are hardly docile ‘bodies’. Here is how one volunteer coordinator describes staff–volunteer relations in campaigns:

Well, most of them are just here to help, right? But there are some that are really opinionated, and just won’t listen. So we have all these discussions of what to put in the script and who to call and whatnot. Everybody thinks they are experts on this. But the real problem is when they start insisting, and try to boss *us* around. [...] That kind of stuff happens all the time.

My analysis suggests that the internet-assisted mobilizing practices through which people are recruited should be thought of as paths to coproduced citizenship, parts of the ongoing negotiation of what active participation in electoral work should amount to. Staffers and volunteers have different perspectives on what political campaigns are and ought to be, and differential access to some specialized tools, but they have complementary interests in winning the upcoming election, and primarily connect through shared, increasingly mundane tools – not through the specialized tools that the staffers have privileged access to and control over. It is mostly via these everyday interactions that people negotiate their role in wider campaign assemblages and decide whether, and in what form, they want to stay involved. The point that active citizens who use shared internet tools play a much more dynamic role in defining their own role in campaigns than the managed citizenship might lead one to believe does not directly contradict the idea that specialized tools afford political organizations some control over more passive citizens. But it does suggest that existing research based on the claims of consultants and the potential of new technologies need to be supplemented by closer scrutiny of how ordinary people themselves navigate and experience the intersection between inherited forms of politics and the booming mass of mundane, emerging, and specialized internet tools.

In most wealthy democracies, mundane internet tools are today available as parts of the built communications environment that has been enhanced in extraordinary ways by the developments of the internet over the past 15 years. Their infrastructural qualities help campaigns connect with volunteers, but complicate staffers’ attempts to manage them – because they rely on shared tools they have little control over. This is illustrated on a small scale by the everyday frustrations of minor glitches and lost connections, and in a more complicated way by the irritation that staffers display when activists and volunteers use equally available tools in ways that the political operatives find counterproductive. But as long as they do not control the technologies or the people involved, there is little staffers can do about this. They have to come to terms with the fact that volunteer engagement organized through shared tools is based on coproduction and collaboration, not control.

## Conclusion

A wide range of different internet tools are integral to politics in the post-industrial world today – tools ranging from simple and familiar things like email to sophisticated and esoteric online-integrated databases are used in different combinations by both mainstream electoral campaigns and radical social movements. Academics, elected officials, and political organizers have long been suggesting that these new technologies come with a

considerable mobilizing potential that can help more people get actively involved in politics and civil life, but so far, we have seen little research dealing directly with which particular tools are actually used in mobilizing people, and what the implications are.

On the basis of an analytical approach adopted from science and technology studies, and data from extensive ethnographic research in two congressional districts in the United States, I have argued that what I call 'mundane internet tools' play a more important role in mobilizing practices in political campaigns than emerging or specialized tools. Which tools are mundane, emerging, and specialized relative to whom will change over time, but my analysis suggests that emerging tools (like social networking sites) are generally largely peripheral to mobilizing practices, and that specialized tools (like online-integrated databases) are also of limited importance today (even as they remain central for fundraising and other purposes). Mundane internet tools like email and search engines, in contrast, are integral to the everyday work of identifying, recruiting, and retaining campaign volunteers. The ubiquity of these technologies attests to their importance, as does the paralyzing consequences of their occasional malfunctions. Mundane internet tools are not only important because they help political campaigns get people involved as activists and volunteers, but also because of the kind of engagement they help create. While some have suggested that specialized 'hypermedia' allows consultants to control people and reduce them to 'managed citizens', close attention to how those who actively participate in electoral politics actually interact and the shared tools they rely on suggests it is more precise to speak of the 'coproduction' of citizenship in campaign settings.

My argument is based on two strategic case studies of campaign assemblages built around Democrats running for the House of Representatives in the United States. It remains an open question and opportunity for further research whether it can be generalized more broadly across and beyond the Democratic Party, beyond electoral politics, and beyond the United States. Democratic and Republican campaigns are likely to be similar in their basic reliance on mundane tools over emerging and specialized ones. When it comes to the use of internet tools in mobilizations beyond electoral politics and beyond relatively well-funded American campaigns, the more limited resources often involved (in social movements, in associational life, and in elections elsewhere) will probably lead to an even greater reliance on mundane tools over more unfamiliar or expensive alternatives. More research focused – like this article – on close scrutiny of situated action and the practical use of new tools in everyday politics around the world can explore the differences between active and passive citizens, between institutional and extra-institutional politics, and the relative civic affordances of different internet technologies in different settings. Such work can complement and complicate both the tacit knowledge of activists themselves and academic analysis based on interviews with consultants, on media-centric analysis of individual technologies, or on larger-scale survey research oriented towards broader trends.

The cases analysed here, for example, suggests that if an ordinary political campaign today relies mainly on some new emerging tools or their own specialized website, believing in the old saying 'build it and they will come', the results in terms of mobilization will probably be disappointing. In a time of communicative exuberance, interactive plenitude, and the harsh realities of low levels of interest in politics and a strained attention economy, only the most extraordinary political campaign can build its own centre of

gravity on the internet. Luckily, there is another way. This article also shows that when electoral campaigns take a page out of every good pedagogue's playbook, and 'meet them where they are' by focusing on the use of mundane internet tools to try to build larger political assemblages by inviting people to coproduce their own role as citizens through shared tools, they can actually realize some of the much-vaunted 'mobilizing potential' of the internet *in practice*, and get people involved.

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## Note

- 1 Repressive regimes will of course often deliberately prevent people from using even mundane tools when these might be politically powerful, and it should be noted that the corporations who provide many of the tools I discuss here sometimes chose to obstruct their use for political purposes, in particular by more radical activists.

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