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Philip N. Howard and Tema J. Milstein

SPIDERS, SPAM, AND SPYWARE: NEW MEDIA AND THE MARKET FOR POLITICAL INFORMATION[1]

Introduction

Technological innovations can radically alter the organization of power in politics. We argue that one of the most important implications of new media is in the market structure for political information. Whereas information about public policy opinion used to be expensive to collect, highly reductive, and restricted to a limited number of powerful political actors, today it is much less expensive, highly nuanced, and widely available. More important, whereas pollsters used to ask direct questions about political opinion, they now have the ability to extrapolate political information from our commercial and non-commercial activities. We investigate the work of two organizations, a public policy polling firm named Grapevine Polling, and an advocacy consulting firm named United Campaigns. We find important changes in the structure of the market in which individuals' and groups' political information is manufactured and sold, and important changes in the qualities of the product itself.

To observe how politics can work in tandem with technology, we must first look at how politics worked without it. Many scholars of political campaigning make distinctions between the pre-modern campaign, the modern campaign, and the postmodern campaign. Between the mid-19th century and 1950, local party volunteers took the pulse of member opinion with party meetings and local canvassing efforts. Very little centralized control of campaign logistics existed. The news media comprised a partisan press, radio, and local posters or pamphleteers, which brought relatively low budget, local public meetings, and whistle-stop leadership tours to the attention of a stable, partisan electorate. Modern campaigns, run between the 1960s and late 1980s, were long, nationally coordinated campaigns

run by professional consultants and specialist advisors from a central party headquarters. Occasional opinion polls helped the campaign keep on top of public sentiments, and the nightly television news broadcasts were the most important medium for publicizing closely managed campaign events. The costs of these campaigns grew immensely to fund televised media events and political commercials, which had to target increasingly fickle cross-sections of the electorate. The postmodern campaigns that developed in the 1990s remained nationally coordinated but became operationally decentralized. Presidential campaigns, in particular, transformed to have their currently permanent quality, applying impression-management strategies from the beginning of primary contests, through the election cycle, through the term of office, to legacy campaigns or preparation for the subsequent electoral contest. Ever more professional consultants use regular opinion polls and focus groups to produce ever more costly targeted campaign television ads and events, trying to manage news production for segments of the electorate that are no longer in stable party alignments. The dominant feature of the new campaign, however, is no longer costly television ads, but instead detailed relational databases and targeted communications multimedia. Today's campaign is more reflexive, less costly, and operates in a marketplace for political information.

Spiders, Spam, and Spyware

Two particular U.S.-based organizations, Grapevine Polling and United Campaigns, are good examples of the kinds of contemporary organizations that work within the marketplace for political information.[2] Both amass and market detailed profiles of citizens using traditional survey and data mining methods, but both have also developed three kinds of powerful new media tools to complement traditional methods. Their spider programs crawl through the Web, automatically collecting Web site content, such as a person's e-mail or physical address, or an organization's press releases. They often employ spam, or unsolicited email, to gather or spread information for commercial or political marketing campaigns. Spyware, a kind of software that Grapevine and United often covertly install on users' computers during Internet use, reports a user's Web activities back to the sponsoring organization. In addition to covert installations, spyware is sometimes installed with the generally underinformed agreement of the user, who often later forgets about its presence. Many companies have developed variations of these tools, but Grapevine and United apply these tools to gathering political information.

Grapevine Polling

Grapevine Polling, a U.S.-based, worldwide market research and consulting firm, has a long history of polling beginning in the 1970s, when it was founded by three professors of social science who specialized in survey methods. In the late 1990s, Grapevine, which is privately owned, switched from doing consumer and political research via face-to-face and telephone to selling itself as pioneering the Internet method to conduct scientifically accurate market research. Grapevine claims to combine the communicative power of the Internet with probability sampling to produce the first statistically valid population-projectable survey tool capable of generating reliable information for decision making. Commercial market research is the bulk of Grapevine's business, so it carefully limits its public policy polling work and only takes contracts from particular clients so as not to run the risk that its findings in a public policy poll will upset the industries that provide 90% of its business. It will not take work from the major political parties, political candidates, or high-profile advocacy groups. Grapevine's annual revenue tops $150 million, and the company employs about 900 full-time employees. The company continues to acquire smaller market research firms, including firms outside the United States, forming a global web of for-profit personal information exchange for marketing purposes. By switching from traditional methods of market research to the Internet, Grapevine asserts it is harnessing the Web's interactive power to gather market intelligence that organizations need, continuously gathering political information about more individuals nationally and internationally.

Where traditional survey methods took several weeks to generate results, Grapevine's Internet surveys take a few hours. Once people agree to participate in the database, their households are equipped with interactive Web TV devices, which participants then use to fill out questionnaires. In addition to Web TV, participants also receive free Internet access; an engineer to install their new gadgets, and free prizes. However, as the saying goes there is no free lunch and, in this case, there is no free 24–7 Web surfing, TV watching, and prize opening. Instead, 24–7, Grapevine tracks the panelists' movements on the Web. This fulfills Grapevine's goal of delivering a 24–7 consumer, tracking the media use (from newspapers to Internet), advertising exposures, attitudes, and purchase behavior of the participants to amass detailed profiles to enrich its information on individuals. The Web TVs deliver consistent multimedia content to the participants/database members and, most notably, embedded database member management and spyware, of which only an advanced Internet user—one who most likely would not agree to be constantly polled in exchange for free Internet access—would understand the meaning. Grapevine summons its respondents by activating a flashing red light on the top of the family's Web TV box. Before data-mining, Grapevine collects—through database participants' answers—demographic information, such as income level, sex, race, age, and information related to interests, hobbies, and product/technology usage. If Grapevine software is running off a person's computer instead of Web TV, it also uses cookies, small data files stored on a computer's hard drive, to collect information such as browser, type of computer, operating system, Internet service provider, access times, and other similar information. In the small print, Grapevine allows users who have their own computer to refuse cookies by turning them off in their browser. Grapevine also claims to release only summarized or nonpersonally identifiable information to its clients and requires participants' consent prior to releasing any personally identifiable information provided during the

survey process. Clients that receive personally identifiable information are required to sign and abide by the standards of disclosure of respondent-identifiable data of the trade association of survey research businesses. However, as a thriving and expanding business that acquires or spins off new companies, business assets, including all survey participant data, are transferred to each new unit. Grapevine has amassed a multimillion member database, with participants hailing from more than 200 countries. Participants also join individual panels based on demographics or interests, such as a musician panel or a teen panel. This subdividing of the database allows Grapevine to offer its clients what it claims to be a valid representation of the entire population via the database, or target populations via the panels.

Grapevine plays a problematic role in this new marketplace for political information. First, some of its tactics used to gain and retain participants are misleading. Grapevine initially advertises to prospective database members via its Web site and ad banners or locates new participants through spider programs and spam. Grapevine then promises participants that expressing their opinion to business and government leaders will greatly influence corporations and government, guiding the way products and services are developed. Grapevine also tells them they will be joining a revolution in research that will irrevocably alter approaches to the collection and application of information, and that participation is part of a citizen's duty to help good governance. After several months, many panelists forget spyware is installed on their machines. Second, the company simultaneously appeals to a user's sense of citizenship and consumer responsibilities. Members of the database are promised "Vine Points" when they participate that they can redeem for free prizes. At the same time, participants give up the right to see how information about their preferences is used (whether for commercial or public policy analysis). Third, because political information is their marketable product, Grapevine and companies like it take advantage of legal protections for their product. An example of a move in this direction can be found in the dozens of words Grapevine has already trademarked, including "Belief," "Communication," "Connectedness," "Deliberative," "Empathy," "Fairness," "Inclusiveness," and "Learner." Thus, Grapevine conflates the incentive to participate as a consumer with the incentive to participate as a citizen. Moreover, it takes advantage of the exciting rhetoric about new media technologies to collect both political and commercial data from participants who think they are participating in an information revolution and guiding government and corporation policy. Finally, the political information that used to circulate in a public sphere now circulates in a marketplace where it is priced, traded, and sold.

United Campaigns

United Campaigns is a political action committee (PAC) that provides consulting services to moderate political causes and candidates. The organization was founded in 1999 and currently has about 100 employees and a growing list of partner affinity groups. Recently, United made a key hire, placing a well-known former

U.S. senator as its chief executive of operations and further strengthening its image as a leading political consultancy. Although the senator does not have previous experience heading an Internet venture or any other kind of company, he has told journalists that United Campaigns will "alter politics as we know it." United offers access to its key asset, its database of individuals' political information, as well as its own brand of Internet-based software to extract and manipulate database information about specific population demographics.

The foundation of United's database came from a company that provides free e-mail service that required its subscribers to fill out our questionnaire supplied created email accounts. The answers from this initial questionnaire supplied United with the demographics of database members, such as age, gender, income, expected major purchases, hobbies, interests, family size, and education. United supplemented this information using spyware to track database members' patterns of computer use. United has significantly evolved its initial database to now include the voter registration information of more than 150 million registered voters in the United States, as culled from state and local boards of elections. In addition, United combines 50 million individuals' records from departments of motor vehicles. Outside the United States, United has begun to build an international database, starting in the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia, with a database that contains registration records of more than 90 million voters. In addition, United continues to run a nonprofit Internet service provider from which it gathers subscriber questionnaire information and Internet use information, via cookies and spyware, to add to its database. United's database thus contains information including date of birth, date of voter or motor vehicle registration, residence address, number of children in the household, political jurisdiction, and party affiliation. Through spider software, spam and spyware, United has found and added e-mail addresses, telephone numbers, estimated income levels, ethnicity of surnames, and homeowner status. United also purchases data from other lobby groups, and its database now contains detailed and growing information on more than 75% of the voting public as well as on hundreds of thousands of unregistered voters.

Like Grapevine, some of United's activities are problematic. First, United has built a relational database using people's detailed personal information without their explicit or informed consent. United uses e-mail registrations, voter registrations, motor vehicle registrations, an individual's movement on the Internet, as well as other undisclosed sources, to amass information that the vast majority of people might not consider public record. In addition, the combination of these various sources of information paints a highly detailed picture of individuals' lives that clients, either political or commercial, can use to uniquely customize messages to manipulate certain responses from each particular individual in the database. Even if some members gave initial informed consent to the use of certain political information, most would not have consented to its continuous aggregation and applications. Already, through United, political organizations and commercial industry are able to drive traffic to their websites by directing customized banner and

e-mail advertisements via the political, demographic, and commercial characteristic profiles of members of the database. In addition, in the deals United makes with some of its partners, partners get access to United's database while also sharing their own databases, amassing an even more detailed and widely shared profile of individuals. Voter registration records are governed by complex regulations—more than 25 states, including California, prohibit the commercial use of voter registration records. Yet, as a PAC, United is exempt from many of these restrictions, so its clients, which may include industry lobby groups, may now order political information through its Web site and have that information delivered as raw data and processed as mailing labels, telephone sheets, walk lists, a polling sample, or a file suitable for import into many popular software programs.

The New Market for Political Information

Grapevine and United are two good examples of the kinds of organizations working in the marketplace for political information. One initially buys individuals' personal information and opinions in exchange for Internet access and free prizes, and then continues to mine data on these individuals to build a detail-rich database to market to clients. Another amasses personal information about individuals, from the start unbeknownst to them and without their permission, using government records, commercial means, and Internet spyware. Grapevine's clients are mostly commercial, but the company is increasingly serving industry lobby groups. United works with political entities but shares information with industry lobby groups that are constituted as PACs. That political information is bought and sold is not new. However, the quality of the product and the structure of the market evolved significantly once organizations started using new media technologies to collect and distribute political information.

The Quality of The Political Information Product. Both Grapevine and United play an important role in the marketplace for political information, with three kinds of informational products and services.[3] First, when industries and services form political lobby groups, both Grapevine and United help these lobby groups legitimize cause by identifying the needs of group members. A lobby group will often claim to represent firms in an industry and, at the same time, claim to represent the consumers of that industry's goods. Thus information about the importance of the industry to the American economy or to American consumers becomes a source of political legitimacy. Second, both Grapevine and United do direct-inference public policy polling for clients. In other words, they run survey instruments that field clear questions about political topics. For example, a direct-inference question might ask, "Should the government offer universal healthcare?" and pollsters can use basic demographic features to explain variation in responses. Third, both Grapevine and United increasingly do *indirect-inference* public policy polling with data from survey questions, demographic data, credit card purchases, Internet activity, or voter registration files that allow for models of public opinion.

They might infer, without actually fielding survey questions, that a woman over 55 years old, living in New York, registered as a Democrat, and spending a significant amount of her income on pharmaceuticals, is very likely to think the government should offer universal healthcare. Moreover, purchases of guns, birth control, or other items can help researchers make indirect inference about a consumer's political attitudes. With new media tools, the research staff at Grapevine and United has amassed so much data from so many sources that the complex relational databases can be used to extrapolate political information without ever directly contacting a respondent. In sum, today's commercially available political information is multi-sourced, nuanced, scaled from named individuals and households to residential blocks, zip codes, and electoral districts.

The Structure of the Political Information Market. The contemporary market for political information now includes a diverse population of actors, including advertising and public relations agencies, media and entertainment companies, university research institutes, pollsters, nonprofits and private foundations, political parties, Internet service providers, and PACs. Both Grapevine and United, however, make deliberate efforts to associate with academic research institutions so as to appear more legitimate. They host conferences, have academics publish with their commercially valuable data, and use university names liberally throughout their corporate identity literature. They buy, sell, and trade political information that in its raw form can be cheaply sold to any citizen with Internet access. In other forms, aggregated and relational, it is more expensive and priced at a point that only the more high-end lobby groups can afford. Thus competition between organizations in this market has driven the prices of political information down, made the product more widely distributed, and made the range of products more diverse—the market for political information is more open than ever before. Ironically, the market for political information has been democratized.

In sum, with the political application of new media, the market grew to have (1) a more diverse group of actors buying and selling (2) a wider and deeper range of political information. Such detailed knowledge about individuals is used to exercise panoptical and discursive power, but is also a key component of the long observed surveillance duty of governance. Contemporary political theorists may agree that the state is defined as the social organization that has legitimate control of both the machinery of violence and the machinery of surveillance, but we find that increasingly other entities have purview over political information. With new media, both political and commercial organizations conduct political surveillance of citizenry. Even though individuals' identities and opinions are bought and sold in the electronic marketplace, the technologies that allow indirect inference about opinions make it less necessary for political organizations to attend to freely voiced views. Customizing political and commercial messages is an old marketing trick, but the degree of tailoring possible with new media is so much more powerful that political information today is a significantly different product. Customizing political messages to the degree possible with new media does violence to the public sphere, restricting our future supplies of political information based

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Net/Working Communities

We first met in cyberspace, and without so much as a handshake, we worked together closely for a year on Internet Research 2.0: INTERconnections, which was held on the University of Minnesota campus in October 2001.

Often during that year, when we told colleagues or acquaintances that we were working on preparations for an Internet research conference in Minneapolis, those outside Internet studies would waggishly suggest that there was no real need for the conference to be held *anywhere* specifically. With eyebrows arched, they would say, "Why don't you just hold it *online*?" This question was asked more pointedly after the attacks of September 11, 2001, 30 days before the scheduled start of Internet Research 2.0.

Ultimately, the vast majority of those scheduled to present at the conference chose to defy the uncertainty and fear associated with that historical moment. Despite significant obstacles, they traveled, joined together, ate together, drank together, talked together, and *worked* together. They reinforced, revised, and extended the networks of colleagues they had been building in virtual spaces.

The collective statement of the nearly 400 attendees at Internet Research 2.0 was that the opportunities for community exchange afforded by the conference outweighed any of the burdens prompted by our renewed awareness of risk. Community *matters* to Internet researchers, in part because their work is often perceived as being at the margins of their academic and professional disciplines, but mostly because the Internet epitomizes the shift from the abstracted, isolated composing space of the "personal computer" to the richly social networks of communal exchange found throughout online environments.

We are now in the second decade of research devoted to articulating, explaining, celebrating, and critiquing the concept of community as it is manifested online. This work is, increasingly, as rich and varied as the work directed toward understanding terrestrial communities. But research on online community spaces rarely commits the error implicit in the suggestion (however flippant) that Internet researchers ought to be content with virtual meetings in cyberspaces. The basis for the suggestion is the misguided notion that Internet researchers view online communities as *substitutes* for terrestrial communities. But the best research on online communities recognizes that these spaces typically complement and extend

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n assumptions of the opinions and identities of our past. Increasingly, we find nat an important part of our political participation occurs somewhat beyond our ontrol, co-opted into a highly privatized and often covert sphere, one that trades, hannels, and filters our political information, thus denying a forum for its direct, ee, and deliberate exchange.

Notes

1. For their assistance with this manuscript, the authors would like to thank Aimee Strasko, Paul Ford, and Nika Pelc.
2. United Campaigns and Grapevine Polling are pseudonyms based on aggregates of our ethnographic and archival study of 18 businesses, academic research institutes, and political action committees between 1999 and 2003.
3. Corporations such as Grapevine and United are very careful to obey state laws that regulate which records can be sold to whom. Even though companies may violate public privacy norms, organizations have legal counsel committed to keeping their work well within the letter and spirit of the law.

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