ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Social Media and Citizen Participation in "Official" and "Unofficial" Electoral Promotion: A Structural Analysis of the 2016 Bernie Sanders Digital Campaign

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Drawing on interviews with leaders of the effort to promote the 2016 Bernie Sanders U.S. presidential candidacy on social media, this study contrasts the structure and content of various organizational networks to map the hybrid ecosystem of the contemporary digital campaign. While the "official" Sanders organization built applications to transform supporters into a tightly controlled distribution network for its social media messaging, this was complemented by "unofficial" grassroots networks that circulated more informal and culturally oriented appeals. The latter are classified according to the models of organizationally enabled and self-organized connective action in digital social movements, with structural differences in oversight and moderation that suggest varying levels of creative autonomy for citizens and reputational risk for the associated campaigns.

For communication scholars, the proliferation of digital social media raises important questions about the shifting relationships between institutions and ordinary citizens and the potential for new forms of grassroots empowerment in a range of social and political processes (Bimber, Flanagin, & Stohl, 2012; Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). In the context of election campaigning, the increasing centrality of social media promotion has focused attention on the participatory role of citizen-supporters, who not only receive campaign messages via platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, but also cocreate and circulate them as a means of contributing to the visibility and outreach of their favored candidates (Kreiss, 2012; Baldwin-Philippi, 2015; Gibson, 2015). Referring to this constellation of activity as part of the "citizen

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marker" approach to political action, Penney (2017) argues that citizen-level electoral participation is becoming more and more shaped by the logics and structures of viral marketing, that is, media promotion that draws its aggregate persuasive force from individual acts of content-sharing and personal endorsement. In certain ways, this shift is attributable to the tactics of professional political marketers, who are adopting a digital two-step flow model of influence—a modern adaptation of Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955) classic model of personal influence—to put enthusiastic supporters to work as peer-to-peer conduits for organizational messages (Stromer-Galley, 2014). At the same time, however, the "citizen marketer" approach also encompasses more grassroots and personalized forms of media-based political expression—such as the spread of politically-charged videos, memes, and other "unofficial" user-generated content—that are deliberately intended to influence peers in informal and culturally oriented spaces. Although these expressive activities often align with and help serve elite institutional agendas in accordance with the professionalized viral marketing model, Penney (2017) argues that the grassroots circulation of persuasive media messages also has the potential to create new forms of networked and democratized political marketing power that are unbounded by traditional organizational logics.

Mirroring these developments in the institutional political sphere, scholarship on digitally enabled social movements emphasizes the personalization of activist communication through the use of social media platforms, as well as the emergence of decentralized organizational networks that Bennett and Segerberg (2013) describe as connective action—a contrast to more traditional, hierarchically organized forms of collective action that have also largely migrated online in recent years. Chadwick (2007) argues that traditional political parties and interest groups are "starting to resemble the looser network forms of social movements" (p. 283), leading to new forms of organizational hybridity and the convergence of political and (sub)cultural discourses. The following study seeks to synthesize these theoretical frameworks by exploring how social media-based participation in electoral promotion aligns with the connective and collective action models, and how this helps to clarify the varying "citizen marketer" roles of those who willfully contribute to the promotion of candidates in both "official" and "unofficial" digital spaces.

The research thus contributes to the understanding of how organizational hybridity in strategic communication continues to develop in the social media era, with particular attention to the emerging benefits and risks introduced by grassroots digital networks that are not formally bounded and that embrace norms of unrestricted cultural production and circulation. Furthermore, the study highlights how these trends are developing alongside—and may complement rather than conflict with—a more tightly bound model of digital two-step flow that uses the social media distribution of organizational messages to bypass mainstream media gatekeepers and directly reach members of the public. In each case, the labor of "citizen marketers" in circulating persuasive media content is paramount, although it is structured by varying degrees of

creative autonomy and hierarchical oversight that I argue help shape citizens' relative roles in broader projects of publicity and advocacy.

To develop this framework, I examine the case study of the online effort to elect Senator Bernie Sanders as U.S. president in 2016, which included both the digital outreach of the formal campaign organization as well as a multilayered social media "movement" that received much attention during the campaign cycle (Mahler & Corasaniti, 2016). Describing the Sanders campaign as a "reassertion of the power of the grassroots-netroots," Chadwick and Stromer-Galley (2016, p. 288) argue that it demonstrates how digitally networked citizens are reshaping traditional political parties along more participatory lines and opening up spaces to decentralize control in electoral democracy. The authors compare the Sanders campaign to a range of other "insurgent internet-fueled campaigns" (p. 286) in both the United States (e.g., the 2004 Howard Dean and 2008 Ron Paul campaigns) and Europe (e.g., Jeremy Corbyn's 2015 campaign for U.K. Labour Party leadership), and suggest a link between digitally enabled grassroots activism in elections and broader political dynamics of protest and populism on both the left and right. Thus, the surrounding context of Sanders the candidate—a Democratic Party outsider who made a call for "political revolution" a central campaign theme—helps account for why his campaign in particular inspired a swell of grassroots online support that has eluded other candidates. While Sanders ultimately lost, the close outcome of the race, combined with his relative obscurity at the outset (according to polling averages aggregated by RealClearPolitics.com, Sanders had around 5.6% support in the national Democratic primary when he entered the race in April 2015, 56 points behind Hillary Clinton; a year later, as the race was drawing to a close, his support had increased to around 45.2%, only 4.2 points behind Clinton), raises questions about the campaign's significance as an insurgent social media "success story" that will likely influence the future shape of political campaigning and strategic communication more broadly.

Drawing on in-depth interviews with organizational leaders of both the "official" and "unofficial" effort to promote the Sanders candidacy on social media, I contrast the structure and content of these organizational entities as a means of mapping the hybrid ecosystem (Chadwick, 2013) of the contemporary digital campaign. This qualitative, source-centered approach is guided by the research goals of detailing the internal structures and decision-making processes behind various digital campaign groups and revealing how the social media contributions of "citizen marketers" are positioned and framed by those who create and administer them. In other words, I aim to uncover the assumptions and logics underlying the "official" and "unofficial" Sanders campaigns and how they were manifested in specific social media promotion tactics.

As detailed below, the interviews point to an emergent division of labor in digital campaign promotion in which different organizational layers serve complementary roles, ranging from traditional top-down political communication to crowdsourced connective action that flows from the grassroots participatory culture of online fan communities. At the same time as the formal Sanders campaign organization built "official" applications that transformed supporters into a tightly coordinated social

media distribution network for its policy-oriented messaging, it also benefited from looser digital networks that created and circulated pro-Sanders content that was more informal and culturally oriented in nature. Using Bennett and Seberberg's connective action typology, I break down the "unofficial" grassroots pro-Sanders groups into organizationally enabled and self-organized connective action types, with each playing a unique role in supplementing the formal campaign's top-down digital outreach with the culturally grounded appeal of amateur user-generated content like humorous memes and viral videos. The apparent success of these connective action networks in fashioning Sanders as a culturally resonant "meme," particularly among younger voters, suggests the growing influence of digitally enabled organizational forms that are not clearly bounded and that emphasize open-ended cultural expression over hierarchical message control.

Indeed, Sanders' campaign staffers credit these grassroots digital networks with significantly boosting his candidacy and filling valuable gaps in its own campaign marketing. At the same time, however, it is also apparent that these "unofficial" groups pose risks along with opportunities when ceding control to individual users who may or may not follow desired social and behavioral norms in their social media activities. In particular, staffers point to the controversy over the perceived social media misconduct of so-called "Bernie Bros" as constituting a major challenge for the Sanders campaign as a whole. The analysis concludes with a discussion of how this multilayered digital campaign ecosystem signals an expanding set of roles that "citizen marketers" may play in the electioneering process, as well as an expanding set of pressures for new forms of management over the seemingly unrestrained digital grassroots.

"Surrogate message carriers," "grassroots intermediaries," and the question of citizen empowerment

The "surrogate message carrier" role of citizen-supporters in election campaigns is far from new—Jamieson (1996) notes how the banner-waving parades of the 19th century served as a primary vehicle for candidate promotion prior to the advent of electronic broadcasting. However, the growth of interactive digital technologies and the emergence of social media marketing tactics have drawn renewed attention to the participatory promotional labor of everyday people in two-step flows of political communication. According to Kreiss (2012), the use of internet platforms to provide supporters with tools to help spread campaign messages dates back to as early as 2000, when the Gore campaign "used the internet to fashion supporters into the conduits of strategic communication … tak[ing] advantage of existing social networks to create a new 'digital two-step flow' of political communication" (p. 8). Such techniques became more and more sophisticated in subsequent election cycles, as campaigns embraced a wide range of Web 2.0 platforms to "seed" their promotional messages across digital networks. As Serazio (2015) puts it in his study of U.S. digital campaign consultants, "operatives have obviously long recognized the authenticity and persuasive power of word-of-mouth, but the new media tools enable strategists to harness it

toward electoral ends—leveraging social networks and maximizing shareable content" (p. 1921). Similarly, Gibson (2015) finds that "citizen-initiated campaigning" (p. 187) driven by institutional digital outreach often emphasizes a message distribution function, as campaigns encourage their supporters to share campaign content on their social media pages. Such practices closely follow the direction that professional marketing has taken more broadly in the age of social media, in which the harnessing of so-called electronic word of mouth has moved to the center of promotional strategy (Penney, 2017).

In her critical review of digital campaigning in U.S. elections, Stromer-Galley (2014) identifies this model of digital two-step flow as amounting to a disempowering and worrisome "controlled interactivity." By using campaign websites, social media feeds, and interactive applications to "direct and control citizen-supporters to work in concert to achieve campaign goals" (p. 5), Stromer-Galley argues that the institutional political sphere exploits the enthusiasm of supporters for tactical ends while affording them little actual voice in the democratic process. However, while the concept of "controlled interactivity" focuses on how political institutions use digital technologies in largely top-down fashion to discipline supporters into online message conduits, Chadwick and Stromer-Galley (2016) also point to the grassroots online activity surrounding certain insurgent and outsider campaigns as representing an alternative model for citizen empowerment in the electioneering process. Along similar lines, Scammell (2014) lauds what she calls the "open source campaign" (p. 52) that she associates with the 2004 Howard Dean and 2008 Barack Obama campaigns, both of which benefited from a large degree of online participation at the "unofficial" level. Citing the production and distribution of amateur online content in support of these campaigns as examples of "campaigning co-creation" (p. 26), Scammell argues that networked digital media is helping to usher in a more democratic and collaborative phase of political marketing. Kreiss (2012), however, suggests a more mixed dynamic at work in the contemporary digital campaign, positing that "theorists who see a dystopic form of elite management and network optimists who see enlightend collaboration as the consequence of changes in technologies miss the hybridity of a form of organizing politics that combines both management and empowerment" (p. 194).

In line with Scammell's optimistic assessment of bottom-up power in the political communication process, scholarship on the related phenomenon of political fandom tends to stress themes of enhanced citizen agency. For instance, van Zoonen (2005) explores how citizens draw from their experiences with entertainment when forging emotional investments with their favorite politicians, and how this encourages a savvy exercise of their "affective intelligence." For van Zoonen, applying the affective dimensions of popular culture fandom to the political sphere holds the promise of cultivating a more active, creative, and critical-minded mode of citizen engagement. In a somewhat similar vein, Corner and Pels (2003) argue that the hybridization of institutional politics and popular culture—that is, the increasing focus on style, image, and personality brought about by the intensive mediatization of the political

sphere—has the potential to revivify interest in politics at a time of increasing public cynicism, and to cultivate new forms of "emotional literacy" (p. 8) among citizens who come to evaluate the political sphere in the manner of familiar and accessible cultural narratives.

Jenkins, perhaps the foremost advocate of popular culture fandom as a means of grassroots empowerment, connects this line of argument to the amateur digital media practices that permeate contemporary fan cultures on the internet. Pointing to the growth of remix videos, humorous memes, parodies, and other grassroots fan media content that is frequently shared in online communities, Jenkins (2006) suggests that this sort of popular culture participation can serve as a model for a more active citizen role in the political media sphere. Mirroring Scammell's (2014) optimism that grassroots digital media can create a more democratized, "open-source" form of political campaigning and marketing, Jenkins celebrates the transference of amateur fan practices to the political sphere as a means of expanding citizens' voice in public affairs more broadly. Importantly, this notion of citizen empowerment through media intervention is not limited to the production of content—that is, creating remix videos, image macro memes, etc.—but also includes the process of circulation as well. Jenkins, Ford, and Green (2013) coin the term "grassroots intermediaries" (p. 7) to describe communities of media amateurs that contribute to message flows around various institutional actors through their networked media-spreading and sharing activities, while stressing the agency of these groups to both assist and challenge institutional agendas. Here, Jenkins et al. build upon the conceptual framework of participatory culture—developed largely in the context of studying fan communities as autonomous and often-disruptive agents in the convergent media landscape (Jenkins, 2006)—to suggest that networked circulation practices engender new forms of bottom-up communication power that push back against models of elite control.

However, while the participatory culture framework is generally optimistic about the democratizing potential of interactive digital technologies and their uses by impassioned fan communities and other "grassroots intermediaries," this body of work has begun to acknowledge a range of negative social consequences that may result from a more open-ended and unrestricted communication environment. In a collaborative volume, Jenkins, Ito, and boyd (2015) identify a range of potential downsides of the participatory culture of the Internet that seemingly gives voice to whomever desires a platform to be heard, regardless of ethical or moral concerns. As boyd puts it, "participatory culture enables—if not empowers—disturbing practices alongside positive ones" (p. 23), including the spread of malicious hate speech and various forms of harassment and intimidation (see also Massanarri, 2015). Following from this point, any analysis of participatory digital media practices in the political realm must be attentive to its potential problematic excesses, as well as its potential benefits for citizen empowerment in public discourse.

The digital campaign in the era of connective action

As noted above, scholarship on election campaign practices in the digital age has considered both the top-down "controlled interactivity" of formal campaign organizations as well as more "open source" models that incorporate a range of amateur digital communication practices. In order to advance the theoretical analysis of this complex field of activity, it is productive to draw upon the typology of digital activist networks developed by Bennett and Segerberg (2013), which contrasts the traditional model of collective action with emergent structures of connective action that stem from the loose ties of online networked community and the personalization of expression via social media. Although the theory of connective action was initially formulated within the context of social movements, it offers a valuable framework for investigating the shifting landscape of electoral political communication for several key reasons. First, as Chadwick (2007) notes, the practices, discourses, and tactics of digitally enabled, nonhierarchical social movement networks have diffused into formal party politics over time and have led to the creation of new hybrid organizational forms (and as discussed below, the Sanders campaign and its Occupy Wall Street connections provides clear and unambiguous evidence of transference between digital social movement repertoires and the institutional political sphere). Second, part of the value of Bennett and Segerberg's model is that it moves beyond a binary opposition between the top-down communication of traditional organizations and the participatory culture of the digital grassroots, and identifies a third structural type — a middle point between the two ends of this spectrum — that mixes elements of organizational coordination and oversight with the personalized expression of networked digital publics.

Lastly, this three-part typology — comprised of organizationally brokered collective action, organizationally enabled connective action, and self-organized connective action — links divergences in organizational structure to key differences in the nature of communication content. Specifically, Bennett and Segerberg associate the organizationally brokered type with standardized message frames that are typical of traditional top-down strategic communication, while associating both organizationally enabled and self-organized connective action with more personalized forms of expression shared via social media (the key distinction being that the former includes some organizational moderation of content, while the latter largely does not). At a time when digital campaign promotion increasingly encompasses both "official" and "unofficial" messages — including amateur-produced memes that mix politics with (sub)cultural modes of discourse (Chadwick, 2007) and the expressive practices of fan communities (Jenkins, 2006) — Bennett and Segerberg's framework is well-suited to addressing stylistic as well as structural differences that emerge in various kinds of social media-based campaigning. A primary goal of the present analysis is thus to investigate the relationship between organizational structure and the qualitative tone of digital content, with particular attention to how both "official" and "unofficial" political groups navigate the terrain of popular culture that is so closely intertwined with

contemporary social media platforms and practices. Furthermore, following from the above discussion, the research is guided by an interest in how these different structures and styles of social media-based electoral promotion frame the participatory role of "citizen marketers," and what this might suggest regarding questions of democratic empowerment and elite control that loom over the study of digital campaigning.

Method

This study uses in-depth qualitative interviews to examine shifting practices of digital campaign promotion in a hybrid media environment comprised of both "old" and "new" media logics (Chadwick, 2013), as well as both traditional and emergent organizational structures. My exploratory approach follows Karpf, Kreiss, Nielsen, and Powers's (2015) call for a "new era" of qualitative political communication research that can help build new theoretical understandings at "a time of rapid changes in media, political, and social structures" (p. 1902). In line with the developing body of research "examining the inner workings of political campaigns and organizations … and the relations between the different actors who collaborate formally or informally to get candidates elected" (p. 1902), such as Kreiss's (2012) work on digital campaign staffers and Serazio's (2015) study of digital consultants, the present analysis draws from interviews with organizational leaders who worked on behalf of a major U.S. election campaign. This behind-the-scenes research thus takes a "source-centered approach" to understanding political communication, in the sense that it directly targets those who actively work to shape political media flows through their organizational labor (McNair, 2011, p. xvi). While other—particularly large-scale quantitative—methods are better equipped to measure the precise scope of social media communication and its impact on a range of attitudinal and behavioral outcomes, the source-centered interview method is ideal for addressing the specific research questions guiding this study: namely, how different types of organizational actors frame the role of social media promotion, and what logics and assumptions about its relative value shape their tactical choices. In keeping with the above-noted research focus on digital campaigning in the hybrid media environment, the relevant sources in question span both the institutional political sphere of formal campaign staffers and the "unofficial" realm of grassroots online groups and communities that contribute in various ways to candidate promotion.

To provide an empirical focal point of investigation, I selected the case study of the 2016 Sanders campaign due to its prominent use of social media and its reputation as a grassroots-netroots campaign of historic importance (see Chadwick & Stromer-Galley, 2016) that will likely be emulated by others. Using the approach of "theoretical sampling," defined as "choosing those whose testimony seems most likely to develop and test emerging ideas" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 107), I chose three major groups involved in the promotion of the Sanders candidacy, each differing in their organizational structure and thus useful for comparative analysis: the digital arm of the professional Sanders campaign organization (AKA Bernie

Sanders for President), the volunteer-run People for Bernie Sanders (PFBS; which coordinated with the formal campaign but was not officially part of it), and the wholly unaffiliated Facebook group Bernie Sanders Dank Meme Stash (BSDMS). In each case, I used preliminary research to identify the figures who served in the highest-level administrative roles for these groups' social media accounts, and contacted these individuals via online channels with requests for phone interviews. In August 2016, I conducted interviews with Bernie Sanders for President digital director Kenneth Pennington and social media director Hector Sigala (the two highest ranking members of the campaign's digital team), PFBS cofounder and administrator Winnie Wong, and BSDMS founder and administrator Will Dowd. To supplement these first-hand accounts and reach a degree of data triangulation, I also repeatedly examined the social media pages of these three groups in close detail, and analyzed major media coverage of their activities as identified via internet searches.

The "official" and "unofficial" digital campaign: Organizing collective and connective action

Like virtually all modern election campaigns, the formal Bernie Sanders for President organization included a digital team that was tasked with producing and distributing "official" promotional content for a bevy of digital outlets. In addition, Sanders' digital staffers were also responsible for coordinating the online efforts of supporters and creating tools and community spaces to steer them towards a variety of campaign goals, such as volunteering, fundraising, and, most importantly for the present discussion, participation in social media promotion. This latter approach, established to a great degree by the 2008 Obama campaign's interactive MyBO tool (Kreiss, 2012; Stromer-Galley, 2014), was employed by the Sanders team in the form of Connect with Bernie (hereinafter referred to as CWB), an online platform that enabled supporters to convene with one another and coordinate directly with the campaign. However, while CWB shares some attributes with MyBO, its rollout 8 years later highlights how "controlled interactivity" (Stromer-Galley, 2014) has continued to develop in a media landscape that increasingly emphasizes social content distribution and electronic word-of-mouth promotion.

In the words of the site's homepage, the Sanders organization built CWB as "the campaign's official social media organizing tool." CWB functioned as a kind of central command for the campaign's various digital efforts: After signing up, users were taken to a page where they received "action alerts" that were aggregated from the campaign's Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and Tumblr pages. The site prompted users to share these "action alert" posts on their own social media accounts, and provided integrated "share" buttons from the respective platforms to facilitate the process. In addition, a percentage-based progress bar was provided to allow users to track their participation in "amplify[ing] Bernie's message," in the language of the site. Hector Sigala, social media director for the Sanders campaign and creator of CWB, explained

that individual supporters could use the tool to receive and pass on messages about the campaign's various initiatives, yet its design was particularly geared towards coordinating the myriad grassroots groups that had popped up across the Internet in support of Sanders: "I think we came up with a list of over 6,000 groups online that were doing like one to four hours a day of social media to help Bernie's campaign … and there had to be a way for the campaign to engage with them and kind of direct their efforts in some way."

To that end, one of CWB's primary goals, as explained on its info page, was to help these various pro-Sanders groups become methodical conduits for the campaign's social media messages: "Bernie doesn't have a corporate media megaphone like other candidates do. But he does have a massive community of supporters who agree that enough is enough and want to do something about it. It's up to you to share much needed messages from the campaign on Facebook and Twitter." Sigala refers to these message conduits as "social media volunteers, or amplifiers" (the latter term was also featured prominently on the CWB site, often appearing next to a megaphone symbol) and contends that their promotional labor made useful contributions to the campaign even if they did not take any further action beyond sharing campaign content with their peer networks: "For the folks that just wanted to use social media and didn't want to phone bank or didn't want to give like ten bucks, we gave them another avenue to help us on social media to reach the folks that will." As Sigala's comments suggest, anyone who took action to share the campaign's promotional messages on his or her own social media accounts was considered to be a valued "amplifier." However, it is clear from the "action alert" system that CWB was designed to foster more intensive and coordinated levels of this "amplifier" activity than what might expected of an average Sanders supporter who had not signed up for the tool.

The campaign thus fashioned CWB users into a highly systematic social media distribution network for its campaign messages, which was particularly crucial given its struggles with garnering mass media coverage. Indeed, one large-scale content analysis found that Sanders' rival Hillary Clinton received three times more coverage in mainstream broadcast and print media in the run-up to the Democratic primary election (Patterson, 2016). Sigala notes that even before the campaign, "Bernie had this inherent distrust of corporate media … he knows that they don't cover the issues that he's most inspired by." As a consequence, Sanders "always found alternate sources, or ways to get his ideas out," and Sigala claims that "from the very beginning of our campaign, we always knew that social media was going to be a huge driving force behind the campaign." The Sanders case study thus illustrates how social media is being tactically deployed to compensate for journalistic inattention, which may be especially important for campaigns representing issues and interests that lie outside of the mainstream.

In addition to providing an alternative means of reaching voters in the face of meager press coverage, Sigala also points to how the coordinated message amplification of

CWB helped the campaign maximize its social media exposure and avoid stumbling blocks related to algorithmic filtering on platforms like Facebook:

> The way Facebook pushes things out is, although we have like one million Likes on the page now, they'll only show [a campaign video] to like one percent of the people or something. … Depending on how quickly they react, whether they 'Like,' comment, share, that determines the organic reach — like how many more of our followers are going to see that video on their newsfeed. So our response was, let's see if we can trick this. Let's plan. We're going to launch this at like 12:32 pm on this day, and we had a bunch of people ready. … And we're like 'hey, this video is about to go up, it's scheduled, is everyone ready? Okay.' And then we hit publish, we let everyone know 'here's the link, it's ready … so go share it as much as you can.' And sure enough, it worked.

According to Sigala, this tactic was particularly helpful when the campaign was releasing more policy-oriented web videos that may not have had as much instant online appeal, such as one featuring Sanders talking for several minutes straight about income inequality: "Folks were just not going to Like it, they weren't going to comment, they're definitely not going to share it, which means no one is going to view it. So our way to kind of counteract that was to use the [CWB] system." In other words, by coordinating groups of "amplifiers" via the tool's alert mechanism to create immediate engagement metrics on Facebook, the video was better positioned to overcome the platform's algorithmic filtering and reach a wider audience.

As techniques like this demonstrate, the message conduit function of citizen-supporters is becoming increasingly central to political marketing strategy in a media environment structured by the logics of peer-to-peer distribution. The Sanders campaign's tactical use of "amplifiers" for message dissemination thus suggests how "citizen marketer" participation (Penney, 2017) has become a concrete asset in the digital campaigning process. This sort of social media distribution network, orchestrated from the top down via sophisticated applications, represents the latest stage of "controlled interactivity" in which the campaign uses its supporters to instrumentally further its goals (Stromer-Galley, 2014). Here, supporters are positioned as proverbial foot soldiers in a battle for social media attention, helping to push out campaign content from central command into the expanses of the internet and pass through the algorithmic gauntlets set up by commercial social media platforms to prioritize only the most "viral" moments.

However, while the "official" Sanders digital campaign followed a fairly traditional pattern of institutionally programmed collective action to disseminate standardized organizational messages, "unofficial" pro-Sanders groups focused more on personalized expression and bottom-up control of message frames. The PFBS was one of the largest of these groups: According to cofounder Winnie Wong, the group's social media pages together reached an average of 160 million users per month during the height of the campaign. PFBS consisted of several primary pages on platforms like Facebook (where Wong claims the number of members to be "a million strong") as well as a voluminous network of what Wong terms "constituency asset" pages (e.g., Asian-Americans for Bernie, Latinos for Bernie, LGBTQ for Bernie, etc.).

As Wong—a seasoned Occupy Wall Street activist—explains, PFBS took direct inspiration from decentralized connective action networks like Occupy:

> We prioritized the grassroots … we essentially believe that every member of our collective has the ability to make a decision when they need to. And those decisions are usually made without having to check in with the larger group. As a result, it's why we have so much content all the time. … Our organizers, our volunteer curators, are empowered to step up and do the thing that they believe is right. And so that is uniquely Occupy, it's very Occupy Wall Street.

Specifically, Wong notes that PFBS gave away administrator passwords to over 50 constituency pages in their social media network, allowing a large number of administrative curators to post unique pro-Sanders content. In each case (including the main PFBS pages, maintained by Wong and a handful of other volunteers), posts were curated and moderated by an organizational hierarchy, yet in a distributed fashion and with an emphasis on personalization and amateur cocreation rather than strict top-down message discipline.

As a result of this connective action structure, the content of PFBS differed in key ways from that of the "official" campaign. For instance, Wong notes that some constituent-focused pages like Millennials for Bernie would occasionally feature "dank memes"—that is, humorous, amateur-produced, popular culture-oriented graphics in the popular image macro format—that appeal to many youthful social media users (and were even more prominent in wholly crowdsourced pro-Sanders online communities, as addressed below). While the videos and graphics put out by the formal Sanders campaign had to be more "cautious," Wong contends, the grassroots PFBS network was free to be "edgier" and "really showcase our creative chops," leading to the circulation of promotional content that took advantage of the informality and cultural accessibility of user cocreation. As an example, Wong points to a volunteer-made video featured on the PFBS network that combined information about rival candidate Hillary Clinton's financial industry connections with an irreverent disco music soundtrack.

Kenneth Pennington, digital director of the Sanders campaign organization, cites this dynamic of stylistic informality in accounting for how PFBS complemented its own "official" social media outreach, explaining that "[PFBS] served a purpose of being on the edge of even formatting and verbiage that I thought was really great … they kind of fit that hole in our social media messaging really brilliantly." While Pennington notes that campaign staffers were in frequent contact with PFBS and often worked closely with its leadership to launch specific promotional hashtags, he also points to the hierarchical "layers of bureaucracy and approval" that placed limitations on the campaign's own digital communications and how this contrasted with the relatively quicker and less restrained messaging of the independent PFBS.

The most prominent manifestation of this stylistic divergence was the hashtag #FeelTheBern, which was launched by PFBS and ultimately became the most iconic symbol of the Sanders candidacy as a whole (the slogan is a humorous take-off of "feel the burn," a familiar popular culture saying that was initially popularized in aerobic

fitness videos of the 1980s). Wong describes #FeelTheBern as "a catchy slogan that we essentially used to distribute the narrative of [Sanders'] policy talking points across the internet," and explains that while the phrase itself had nothing to do with policy, it served as a useful vehicle to draw social media users into the campaign: "You discover the content through the hashtag, and then when you land on the content, that's when you discover more about the candidate." When #FeelTheBern "caught wildfire," Pennington says, the campaign was initially concerned about how its lighthearted tone might impact perceptions of the candidate:

> At the beginning, there was a sense in the campaign of like, 'oh my gosh, we need to stamp this thing out,' because one of the challenges we had early on in the campaign was in establishing Bernie Sanders as a serious presidential candidate. … And then you have this kind of jokey hashtag out there, and we're like 'we can't support this.'

However, as #FeeltheBern exploded in popularity on the Internet—at one point outpacing the Clinton campaign's most popular hashtag by a ratio of over two to one (Kreig, 2015)—the Sanders team decided to embrace it and use it in at least some of their digital messaging.

Sigala, who controlled the campaign's social media accounts, explains that "we only used [#FeelTheBern] maybe a dozen times throughout the whole campaign, and almost, if not every time, it was when we were acknowledging the grassroots part of our campaign. We very much kept that tied to 'this is the grassroots success, and here's the hashtag they use, here's our kudos to you.'" In other words, the campaign still maintained something of a distinction between its own institutional voice and that of PFBS, even as it incorporated some of the latter's informal and popular culture-oriented message frames into its "official" social media outreach. While Pennington and Sigala note several of these crossover moments between the two main organizational poles of the Sanders campaign, it is clear that the groups saw one another as distinct counterparts that each had a role to play in promoting the candidate online.

Thus, the "controlled interactivity" of the formal Sanders organization—epitomized by the CWB tool and its focus on coordinating top-down message amplification—made up only one part of a digital promotional ecosystem that also included more decentralized networks of the connective action type. As underscored by the Occupy Wall Street connections of PFBS, structural models and communication styles that have developed in recent years in digitally enabled social movements are being imported into the field of electoral political marketing to create new hybrid organizational forms that serve as additional and complementary layers (see also Chadwick, 2007). Although the notion of hybridity between elite management and grassroots empowerment is well-established in the study of contemporary digital campaigns (see Kreiss, 2012), the Sanders 2016 case study points to its increasing sophistication, in which a delegation of responsibility forms between tighter structures of collective action that exploit the message conduit role of social media "amplifiers," and looser structures of connective action that capitalize on the cultural resonance of informal and personalized styles of online political expression. In fact,

the prominent role of grassroots groups in the Sanders campaign — epitomized not only by PFBS and its popular #FeelTheBern hashtag, but also by the nearly 200,000-strong "Sanders For President" Reddit subgroup that became a significant force for organizing volunteers (Chadwick & Stromer-Galley, 2016) — suggests that an exclusive focus on "controlled interactivity" may not be the only viable path for contemporary digital campaigns. Rather, depending on levels of supporter enthusiasm, which is by definition always contextual and contingent (and may hinge upon broader political dynamics of insurgent populism and protest, among other factors), the grassroots can potentially elevate candidates from obscurity to widespread notoriety while never being subsumed into the "official" campaign.

In the following section, I explore the promotional contributions of wholly crowd-sourced digital spaces that flow from the cultural patterns of online fan communities. Akin to self-organized connective action networks in social movement activism (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013), these structures present further opportunities for campaigns to benefit from "unofficial" online promotion. However, their more open-ended, nonhierarchical structure also introduces certain risks. Unlike organizationally enabled networks like PFBS that employ some hierarchical oversight and curation of content, the undisciplined and free-form nature of crowdsourced networks can serve as breeding grounds for "off-message," and potentially controversial, forms of personalized social media expression that complicate assessments of strategic efficacy.

Self-organized connective action: The role of political fan cultures

The BSDMS was created on Facebook in October 2015 by Will Dowd, a 21-year-old college student with no prior experience in political organizing or activism. According to Dowd, he and his friends initially conceived the page as a space for popular-culture-oriented humor in tribute to Sanders, following in the vein of many online fan communities: "We all just like memes and we just wanted a place to share them … we couldn't think of a theme for it, so we just thought hey, we all like Bernie Sanders, why not make a Bernie Sanders meme page?" In the page's early days, Dowd's focus was simply on having fun with his friends, noting that "we didn't think anything serious of it." However, as the page grew in popularity on Facebook — eventually reaching over 400,000 members — Dowd claims that user contributions became more explicitly political and partisan in terms of promoting the campaign. For instance, he points to the sharing of pro-Sanders news articles and various anti-Clinton posts on BSDMS, which he says increased rapidly over time.

While such content veered from the page's intended theme of funny Sanders-related memes, Dowd felt largely powerless to stop it. This lack of control was attributable to the fact that Dowd deliberately created the page as an online free-for-all, with a self-described "lax environment" for posting and very little monitoring or oversight (eventually, he and around 40 other volunteer admins created an approval system for posts, although he claims that it was only meant to keep out "clickbait" and "trolls" rather than filter submissions on political or thematic

grounds). As Dowd explains, "one of the whole beliefs of it was 'dank memes for everyone.' So we had to make it a public page," meaning that anyone who joins as a member through a simple click-request can post unique content. Dowd credits this permissive environment as being key to its success, as it attracted hundreds of thousands of Facebook users who enjoyed its irreverent free-form tone and seized it as a space of their own. BSDMS thus took the form of a fully crowdsourced online political community, in line with Bennett and Segerberg's (2013) account of self-organized connective action that emphasizes personalized and individualized expression over centralized message frames.

This nonhierarchical structure is underlined by the fact that BSDMS had no working relationship with the formal campaign organization at any point during the election cycle, even though it eventually grew into a community that Dowd believes took itself quite seriously as part of the digital Sanders "movement." Unlike PFBS, which was in regular contact with the campaign to coordinate messaging strategy, Dowd's 400,000-strong Facebook page was simply left alone. From the campaign's perspective, there was a logic behind keeping such a distance. Staffers were certainly well-aware of communities like BSDMS, as digital director Pennington attests: "For the younger folks on the campaign, we loved the kind of organic creativity that was coming out of places on the web like Facebook or Reddit, with regard to these kind of memes. And we would pass them around the office all day and talk about them." When asked why the campaign did not coordinate with Dowd's group in the way it had with PFBS, Pennington explains that "we didn't see a way that we could inject some of our official messaging into their unofficial messaging in a way that wouldn't kind of ruin what they were doing, comedy-wise. Like if I had reached out and said 'hey, can you guys promote phone banks,' whatever they would have to produce after that point would probably ruin the comedy part."

Crucially, Pennington's reason for not wanting to meddle with this humorous content was that he saw it as playing a successful role in promoting the candidate to younger voters—one that complemented the campaign's more serious-minded, policy-oriented messaging: "Those memes, even though they're just funny jokes, actually served an important purpose for us as a campaign, which was projecting Bernie Sanders and his vision as like 'hey, this is where the country is headed, and you know, it's hip, and young, and it's futuristic.'" As an example, Pennington points to the so-called Bernie vs. Hillary meme, which Dowd cites as one of the most popular on BSDMS. The meme is a parody of election posters that compare the two candidates' positions on a specific policy issue, and was originally created by comedian Jeff Wysaski for his Tumblr blog. Each iteration features fake response quotes from Sanders and Clinton to a seemingly random popular culture topic like Harry Potter, Star Wars, or anime (Broderick, 2016). The running joke in most cases is, as one online observer put it, "Bernie [knows] what he's talking about and is relatable while Hillary is out of touch" (Hess, 2016). For Pennington, memes such as these were valuable for the campaign in terms of defining the public images of Sanders and Clinton in favorable terms: "[The memes] really spoke to a feeling about

these two competing candidates that actually I think really did push our candidate a little bit further."

The notion of defining a candidate as authentic and culturally savvy—and conversely framing an opponent as inauthentic and culturally illiterate—aligns with what Street (2003) describes as the campaign tactic of "cool politics," that is, appealing to voters at the level of popular culture and inspiring the kind of emotional attachments that are common in celebrity-fan relationships. Whereas Street examines how politicians have actively pursued "cool politics" from the top down (for instance, by associating themselves with rock stars), the memes that circulated widely on BSDMS represent a form of "cool politics" from the bottom up. In such cases, supporters take it upon themselves to build these culturally grounded associations by emulating patterns of effusive hero worship (and ridicule of perceived enemies) that are familiar in online fan communities. The result of this crowdsourced cultural production and circulation is a form of participatory campaign promotion that positions supporters not as message conduits, but rather as autonomous "grassroots intermediaries" for political brands (Jenkins et al., 2013).

As Street (2003) argues, packaging politicians in the stylish language of "cool" has the potential to make politics more accessible for citizens—particularly younger voters—who may be averse to elite policy debates and thus disengaged from the democratic process. In explaining why he believes that popular-culture-oriented memes served a key promotional function for the Sanders campaign, Pennington emphasizes this precise theme of accessibility: "For a lot of people, it might be their gateway into discovering who Bernie Sanders is and what he's all about … these memes are really broadening the reach, they're educating and kind of bringing in a whole new group of younger folks who tend to not participate on the same level as older folks." While it is debatable whether the satirical memes that circulated in spaces like BSDMS spurred the kind of "affective intelligence" lauded by van Zoonen (2005) in her optimistic account of political fandom, it is clear that from the campaign's perspective that the promotional rewards of a crowdsourced "cool politics" were a welcome addition to its own electioneering efforts.

Moreover, the ostensible success of groups like BSDMS suggests that campaigns may stand to benefit from delegating "cool politics" tactics to unaffiliated grassroots networks that draw from the model of self-organized connective action and the "brand evangelism" of online fan communities. This is because campaigns may become vulnerable to public backlash when attempting to do this work themselves, which can be perceived as an inauthentic form of pandering to young voters. Indeed, the 2016 Clinton campaign received critical press coverage and negative social media reaction when it adopted a youthful, hip tone on its "official" social media outlets, including an incident in which a call to young supporters to express their policy views via emoji symbols was met with widespread derision (Kaufman, 2015). By contrast, both Pennington and Sigala emphasize the consistent policy focus of their formal social media messaging and their hesitancy to mimic the lighthearted, youthful tone of groups like BSDMS (even though, as noted above, they occasionally nodded to

the grassroots with #FeelTheBern). It would thus appear that the self-organized "cool politics" contributions of these wholly independent groups freed the campaign to take the proverbial high road on its own social media accounts and avoid the kind of negative backlash experienced by the Clinton campaign. Again, the different elements of the Sanders digital campaign can be understood as serving complementary and divergent roles, forming a multilayered ecosystem that takes promotional advantage of both the high-minded "official" tone of formal campaign messaging and the "cool" youthful appeal of vernacular popular culture.

At the same time, however, the 2016 Sanders case study also reveals new forms of risk that emerge when digital campaigning comes to include a more prominent role for self-organized networks and crowdsourced contributions, even when they are held at arms length from the formal campaign. Specifically, the open-ended environment of these spaces provides an outlet for behaviors and content that may breech norms of social acceptability, veering into territory of offensiveness and harassment that can harm the reputations of the associated campaigns. Over the course of the Democratic primary, the Sanders campaign received a bevy of negative press related to the contro-versy over so-called "Bernie Bros," that is, Sanders supporters (assumed to be mostly young White men) who were seen as acting disrespectfully on social media—even racist and sexist—towards those who disagreed with them. For instance, the afore-mentioned Bernie vs. Hillary meme, which flourished in crowdsourced spaces like BSDMS, was criticized by outlets like *Buzzfeed* and *Slate* for potentially reinforcing the sexist stereotype that women have less cultural knowledge and expertise than men (Broderick, 2016; Hess, 2016).

Even more significantly, the perception of "Bernie Bro" bad behavior on the aforementioned Sanders for President Reddit subgroup—another online community of the self-organized, crowdsourced type—became such a problematic narrative for the campaign that staffers were compelled to intervene. For instance, Sigala recounts posting a message to this Reddit subgroup that pleaded for participants to remain "respectful" towards others. Yet despite such attempts at message control, the campaign's digital staffers saw the cropping-up of fringe voices online as inevitable. Both Pennington and Sigala claim that objectionable pro-Sanders voices on social media were very few in number, and in some cases may have been "trolls" looking to stir up trouble for fun rather than sincere Sanders supporters working to aid the campaign. However, Pennington admits that the resulting "Bernie Bro" narrative presented a major challenge, particularly as the rival Clinton campaign used it to their advantage:

> One of the things that I think is significant about this election is the extent to which the media and the operatives who supported Hillary Clinton have really kind of overly dramatized a few select voices out of a massive sea of voices on social media … it's really easy to take a comment on Reddit and take a screen shot of it, or take a tweet on Twitter … and explode that on a national level, and now everybody's looking at it.

Pennington further suggests that it was a "brilliant tactic" on the part of Clin-ton operatives to demand that the Sanders campaign apologize for certain offensive

voices on social media, which only seemed to reinforce the broader narrative that its supporters were a problem.

Thus, the Sanders 2016 case study suggests that the cultural "wild west" (as Pennington put it) of Reddit subgroups and other crowdsourced online communities like BSDMS presents a double-edged sword for campaigns in the social media age. On the one hand, these spaces open up valuable opportunities for self-organized connective action that takes advantage of the popular appeal of personalized expression and cultural accessibility that formal organizations may struggle to adopt on their own. On the other hand, they also open up the door to controversial behaviors and content that can damage campaigns' reputations, particularly as oppositional actors are incentivized to magnify them for tactical gain.

Conclusion

The organized effort to promote the 2016 Bernie Sanders presidential candidacy online was a hybrid of traditional top-down campaigning and the sorts of digitally enabled grassroots networks that first developed in social movement activism before migrating to the field of electoral party politics (Chadwick, 2007). Thus, in order to assess the potential influence of the Sanders campaign on the future shape of digital politics and strategic communication more generally, it is necessary to examine its various components as a complex digital ecosystem that spans both "official" and "unofficial" groups and incorporates varying roles for participation. The above analysis began by examining two key digital community structures that shared an emphasis on organizational coordination to promote the Sanders candidacy, but differed in terms of their model of networked action, and, as a consequence, the style of their social media content. The first, CWB, was created by the formal Sanders campaign organization to coordinate the online efforts of supporters (including the spread of promotional campaign messages), and followed a top-down model that corresponds with Bennett and Segerberg's (2013) account of centralized collective action and organizationally brokered networks of digital activism. The second, PFBS, was created by a group of independent grassroots activists—including veterans of the Occupy Wall Street movement—and followed a model of connective action that was established by Occupy and other decentralized, digitally enabled social movements. In the former, supporters were largely positioned as "amplifier" conduits for the campaign's various social media posts and pawns in a battle to overcome algorithmic filtering on platforms like Facebook, signaling the continued advancement of "controlled interactivity" (Stromer-Galley, 2014) in a media environment increasingly structured by the social sharing of digital content. In the latter, supporters were empowered to act as "grassroots intermediaries" (Jenkins et al., 2013) to spread amateur promotional content that was informal and culturally oriented in tone, yet still within the confines of organizational oversight and curation.

The latter's hierarchical yet distributed moderation of personalized communication contrasts with the third kind of digital campaign group—wholly self-organized,

crowdsourced community pages like BSDMS—that mirrors grassroots online fan communities in its norms of unrestricted cultural production and circulation. Within the deliberately permissive digital environment of BSDMS, Sanders supporters created and shared politically charged messages that served as an accessible and entertaining form of promotional outreach to younger voters. Sanders' own digital staffers attest that unaffiliated, fan-like online communities like BSDMS made a significant contribution to the marketing of their candidate, complementing their formal policy-oriented messaging with a distinctly youth-oriented "cool politics" approach that they themselves were wary to adopt out of reputational concerns.

The multilayered ecosystem of the online Sanders "movement" thus points to an expanding set of roles for "citizen marketer" participation (Penney, 2017) in digital campaign promotion. To be certain, the message conduit role remains perhaps more crucial than ever before because of the ongoing shift towards social content distribution structured by the logics of digital virality. However, the "amplifiers" of the campaign's formal social media messaging, enabled by the CWB tool, comprised only one element of a complex constellation of pro-Sanders "citizen marketer" activity. As illustrated by "unofficial" groups like PFBS and BSDMS, connective action models that have grown out of the social movement field open up spaces for citizens to become active participants in the shaping of persuasive political communication, particularly as they "fill the gap" of spreading promotional content that is more informal, personalized, and culturally grounded in nature. To some extent, this pushes back against concerns over elite control and management in digital campaigning that threatens to disempower citizens in the democratic process (Stromer-Galley, 2014). However, following Kreiss's (2012) point that the "basic goal alignment between these campaigns and their supporters" (p. 197) means that citizens are often enthusiastic to serve in an instrumental service role, the activities of grassroots digital networks appear to be less focused on speaking back to candidates than on finding new and innovative ways to evangelize them in "unofficial" spaces of popular culture.

At the same time, the increasingly prominent role of these independent "grassroots intermediaries" in digital campaigns create pressures for new forms of elite management and control, particularly as concerns over the excesses of free-for-all digital spaces present them with new liabilities. One clear manifestation of this trend is the attempt by Sanders' digital staffers to discipline supporters on Reddit by directly asking them to be more respectful in their online communication, a tactic that may be employed more systematically in the future as personalized social media activity filters more and more into the hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013). Indeed, one of the key insights of Sanders' digital staff was that as the campaign became so closely associated with the digital grassroots, the objectionable contributions of even a small number of supporters (i.e., the so-called "Bernie bros") created vulnerabilities that political rivals could seize upon to impugn the candidate's image. As the issue of incivility in the participatory culture of the internet continues to grow in public prominence more generally (Jenkins et al., 2015; Massanarri, 2015), the question of how campaigns and other organizations attempt to mitigate these dynamics

and balance the reputational benefits and risks posed by "grassroots intermediaries" becomes increasingly pertinent for assessing the complex and sometimes unintended consequences of social media communication.

Following from this point, the emergence of the organizationally enabled connective action model in the 2016 Sanders campaign, represented by PFBS and its distributed network of administrative content curators and moderators, suggests how "controlled interactivity" may be reconciled at a structural level with the more unrestricted digital grassroots. As Bennett and Segerberg (2013) emphasize, these organizational types combine the personalization of crowdsourced communication with at least some of the structural hierarchy of more traditional organizations. At this point, it is unclear whether the PFBS model will be emulated in future campaign cycles, although the compromise it appeared to strike between personalized social media expression and organizational oversight and curation points to an emerging approach for negotiating the various top-down and bottom-up forces of the contemporary digital campaign.

Moreover, in line with Chadwick and Stromer-Galley (2016), the present analysis affirms the enduring possibility of grassroots democratic empowerment in the electoral process and the limits of a wholly top-down, elite management model of digital campaigning. For scholars of political campaigns and of strategic and organizational communication more generally, this suggests the need to question the common assumption that organizational capacity stems only from clearly bounded entities. However, rather than signaling a dichotomy of opposing approaches, the complementary structures of the digital Sanders campaign point to their potential integration—or perhaps *imbrication*—as different communication tactics and styles are delegated to various "official" and "unofficial" layers of the campaign ecosystem and new hybrid organizational forms emerge that borrow elements of each.

While the interview testimony presented above offers a productive glimpse into the inner workings and logics of such an ecosystem, it also has important limitations. First, the statements and recollections of organizational leaders may or may not represent the precise dimensions and communication practices of the groups in question, and future research would be valuable for assessing their claims with other methodological approaches, such as large-scale quantitative content analysis and network analysis. Second, the Sanders case study—although undoubtedly important in the history of modern digital campaigns—may or may not be representative of broader trends in digital campaigning that cut across political parties and electoral systems. Thus, future research that places the Sanders campaign's use of social media in comparative analysis with that of Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton, and other major political candidates—as well as campaigns outside of the U.S. context—would offer a more robust picture of how elite and grassroots social media communication is negotiated by various types of organizational actors.

The high-profile social media "movement" to promote the Bernie Sanders presidential campaign suggests just one of many directions for the future of digital campaigning. However, its complex ecosystem of "official" and "unofficial"

digital community structures and promotional message types alerts us to how the connective action model of Internet-enabled social movements, along with the grassroots participatory culture of online fan communities, are converging with institutional strategic communication in new and consequential ways. These trends are broad in their implications, but may be particularly significant for outsider and insurgent campaigns that are fueled by grassroots support and depend upon social media promotion to compensate for a lack of traditional media exposure, particularly via mainstream journalistic coverage. As the study of communication advances in a rapidly shifting hybrid media environment, this attention to relational context, as well as an expanded purview that crosses institutional and cultural spheres, will be crucial for making sense of the full scope of strategic social media use in electoral politics and beyond.

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