Chapter 7
Exploring the Concept of the "Social Media Campaign"

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ABSTRACT

On May 2, 2011, Canadians voted in what the news media dubbed "Canada's First Social Media Election." This allowed Canadians to join their neighbours to the south who, arguably, had gone through one national social media election during the 2008 bid for the presidency. Through a theoretical discussion of what constitutes sociality and networked sociality, and a critical examination of social media as a campaign tool, this chapter asks "What makes a campaign social?" It also asks if the term "social media campaign" adequately describes current campaign practices? In exploring these questions, the chapter draws on the 2011 federal election in Canada and the 2008 American election. Ultimately, the chapter argues we have limited evidence that social media has led to increased sociality when it comes to electoral politics. This calls the appropriateness of the term "social media campaign" into question. Such lack of evidence stems from the dynamism of networked sociality, which renders it difficult to understand, and methodological difficulties when it comes to capturing what it means to be "social."

INTRODUCTION

Political campaigns around the world are increasingly being referred to as 'social media campaigns' in electoral politics. On May 2, 2011 Canadians, for example, voted in what the news media dubbed "Canada's First Social Media Election" (Curry 2011). Britain's first social media election was in 2010 (Arthur 2010). Elections in other parts of the world, such as Singapore and Thailand, are also increasingly being called 'social'. This growing phenomenon has followed Obama's successful use of social media during his 2008 bid for the presidency, which has been described as "the watershed moment for social media in politics" (Curry, 2011). But what makes an election campaign a social media campaign? This concept has been ill defined. Too often it is used to capture the simple presence of a party or political candidate in the social media sphere, or any political activity during an election period that engages with social media. As will be demonstrated, this includes identifying and quantifying parties and candidates with a profile on popular social networking sites,

such as Facebook or Twitter. The purpose of this chapter is take a step back and to better flush out our understanding of a political social media campaign by asking two main questions. First, what makes a campaign social; is presence on a social networking site sufficient or should they meet additional criteria? Second, does the term social media campaign adequately describe recent election campaigns, such as the 2008 American election or the 2011 Canadian federal election? The answer to this question is more than semantics. Clearly identifying the characteristics of a so called social media campaign has the potential to help us better categorize and discuss the various interactive functions of a campaign as well as the strengths and weaknesses which may be associated with each. Such a nuanced definition or understanding of the concept will be of interest to those studying the intersection between social media and electoral politics as well as those interested in the broader literature related to e-democracy and e-participation which make claims about the potential of technology to enhance democracy and citizen engagement. It also has the potential to help identify gaps in our understanding when it comes to the impact of social media. In doing this it raises interesting questions and issues that might be addressed in the future so that we can have a more concrete understanding of sociality, and networked sociality, which will be discussed below. Perhaps most importantly, having a well-defined understanding of a social media campaign today provides a useful point of departure from which to gauge and discuss future change or deviation.

This chapter is divided into four main sections. The first section starts to explore the above-mentioned questions by building on the concepts of 'social', 'social media' and 'Web 2.0' as well as common understandings political campaigning, to establish criteria for determining what constitutes social media campaigning. The second section offers a brief overview of social media campaigning focusing on the 2008 American election, widely thought of as the first large scale social media

election, and the 2011 Canadian federal election as one of the more recent jurisdictions to experience its 'first' social media election. The third section returns to the chapter's original research questions. It explores the elements of the two campaigns discussed here in the context of the definitions offered earlier in the chapter in an effort to construct a better understanding of how a social media campaign might be defined. The fourth, and final, section explores avenues for future research. Ultimately, the chapter argues that we have limited evidence of sociality when it comes to electoral politics, calling the appropriateness of the term social media campaign into question. Such lack of evidence stems from the dynamism of networked sociality, which renders it difficult to understand, and methodological difficulties when it comes to capturing what it means to be social. The goal here is modest. Limitations of length make an in-depth examination of all aspects of the case studies as they relate to Internet technology impossible. They also necessitate the simplifying of the concept of sociality, which has a long, varied and eloquent history. The goal here is to start building a better understanding of social media campaigns and the intersection between the Internet and politics. Future work, building on the discussion offered here, will be both interesting and welcome. It is unlikely to think that social media will cease being a part of the campaign toolbox. Towner and Dulio (2012) forecast continued and growing use of new media, particularly social networking tools, for future campaigns in the United States. Indeed, it wouldn't be farfetched to assume this prediction be fulfilled, not only in the United States, but also much more widely. As such more detailed discussions about what the term means will only continue to gain importance.

BACKGROUND

As an initial step in addressing the chapter's goal to define the term social media campaign, it is useful

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