

Chapter 7

Digital Campaigning in France, a Wide Wild Web?

Emergence and Evolution of the Market and Its Players

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ABSTRACT

In spite of the extensive media coverage of election technologies, the market and its players remain largely unknown. Who are they? What do they do? What are their strategies? This chapter leverages new empirical data to answer these questions, drawing in particular from a series of interviews with providers of political technology in France. We show that the sector is heterogeneous and that its boundaries are fluid, including actors who provide wildly different services and initially embraced different economic and technological strategies. We also show that the nature of the services provided as well as the partisan dimension of each company depends on its target customers. However, due to economic constraints, the sector is undergoing a radical restructuring. The laborious implementation of “elections 2.0” in France is continuing with an increasing professionalization of its players, leading the sector to become more homogeneous and internationalized.

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INTRODUCTION

Some ten years after their introduction in the United States, new electoral campaign techniques appeared in France with the creation of the start-up Liegey Muller Pons (LMP) in 2012. Their widely reporter role in François Hollande's successful presidential campaign is considered as the foundational moment for the expansion of digital campaigning in France. Since then, the importance of digital campaigning has kept increasing with each electoral cycle. Companies that offer this type of service are now considered as "strategists"¹, as a necessary supporting element², which is seen as holding the "secret recipe"³ to win the Elysée⁴, the National Assembly⁵ or, again, the European Parliament⁶. In this evolution, the providers of digital campaigning services benefit from strong media coverage and are increasingly depicted as essential to win elections. However, the lack of substantial knowledge and numerous approximations regarding the reality of their activities are blatant in this coverage. For lack of precise information, the names of companies become synonymous with digital campaigning and political big data, with frequent use of name dropping. Actors like NationBuilder have seen their notoriety increase, but little is actually known about these new electoral players.

In this context, the study of the actors behind 'elections 2.0' provides a first insight into the field. We highlight the sociological and economical complexity of the profession and show the existence of a heterogeneous group whose activities are wildly varied and dependent on different technological strategies. We also study the dynamics of the market, showing that the digital campaigning sector is undergoing a profound restructuration due to economic difficulties (market size, profitability). We have identified three types of strategies that actors use to adapt: intra-political, with the extension of the market outside election campaigns; extra-political, with the diversification of clienteles; and, finally, complete withdrawal from the market. The new configuration of the digital campaigning market underscores a growing professionalization, as well as a global homogenization of the actors.

THE ACTORS IN THE DIGITAL CAMPAIGNING LITERATURE

A lot of research in political science and political communication has focused on digital campaigning through different dimensions, such as door-to-door campaigning (Lefebvre, 2016; Bhatti et al., 2016; Théviot, 2016a), political engagement and participation (Koc-Michalska, Gibson, Vedel, 2014; Koc-Michalska, Lilleker, 2017) or the influence of digital tools on election campaigns (Jungherr, 2016). Emerging technologies offer new and less costly campaigning opportunities facilitated by digitization (Stromer-Gallery, 2014) and data collection (Nickerson, Rogers, 2014). Online communication has become the norm during election campaigns (Koc-Michalska et al., 2016) but in different ways depending on the country (Lilleker, 2016). Technology companies are shaping political communication in which social media have taken a prominent role (Kreiss, McGregor, 2017), which is also the case in Europe (Lilleker et al., 2017). Nevertheless, according to some observers, not all these changes are as pronounced as they are claimed to be (Kreiss, 2011). For example, a case study in Portugal shows that digital campaigning has reinforced previous trends in political communication, more than it has been a revolution or a radical disruption (Novais, Alvaro, 2014).

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