

Lessons for Internet campaigning from the US 2016 presidential primaries

**David C. Hoffman, Danny Lundy,
Amanda Anderson and Michael Lanza**

Abstract

This is a report based on observations of the websites and the Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram pages of what were the nine leading candidates in the US presidential primary races between January 15th and February 10th of 2016. During this period each site was observed daily. Using these observations, the authors created an overview of the social media use of each campaign, a list of observed best practices or “lessons,” and some question for future research. We found that the average number of daily posts between January 15th and February 1st were associated with campaign strength, but that different candidates had extremely different social media profiles from the very beginning. We consider the following strategies, observed in one or more of the campaign sites, to be best practices: 1) Project a strategic image by coordinating a variety of campaign elements; 2) Use website elements to promote real-world action; 3) Use postings to highlight and respond to real-world events; 4) Build credibility and community by displaying campaign followers. We also observed that sometimes campaigns fail despite exemplary social media usage.

Keywords: Social media, US presidential primary elections, communication strategy, campaign websites, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Hillary Clinton, Bernie Sanders, Donald Trump

Many studies have documented how social media and web-based engagement platforms have changed the way political and cause-based campaigns operate (Auger, 2013; Bekafigo, *et al*, 2013; Bor, 2014; Hawthorne, *et al*, 2013; Serazino, 2014). All major national campaigns now have an online presence. The expansion of new media has facilitated entirely new modes of political engagement. Nothing quite like Twitter and Facebook existed in the past, and both have become important tools in politics and activism, largely birthed in the 2008 Obama campaign. Advocates and candidates have turned to social media especially to engage younger citizens who have traditionally been political bystanders.

The move toward the use of social media and the internet in political and cause campaigns is somewhat justified by the fact that there appears to be a positive correlation between social media presence and electoral success. Studies

observing mentions of political parties on social media, specifically Twitter, and vote count show a strong positive correlation (Tumasjan et al, 2010; DiGrazia, 2013). The more candidates are mentioned in social media, the more likely they are to be elected. This does not necessarily mean that social media mentions cause electoral success: it might be that political popularity manifests itself both in social media mentions and in electoral success, and thus social media. However, in the wake of Donald Trump's presidential victory, it is difficult to believe that social media are not at least contributing causes of popularity and success.

Although no credible campaign now lacks an online and social media presence, and the overall strength of that presence is correlated to electoral success, other aspects of the general optimism for internet campaigning seem to be unfounded. For instance, Boulianne (2015) concludes from a meta-analysis of 36 studies of social media use by campaigns that success in voter outreach on the internet and social media has a "minimal impact" on political participation. Xenos (2007) explains that while Americans are increasingly using the Internet to acquire information, individuals that engage in political activities online, like donating to a campaign, or participating in an online deliberation, are the Americans already predisposed to engaging in political activities. The implication is that those predisposed individuals will continue to use the Internet for political purposes and become more politically active, while the others' participation remains constant. Although Obama's Facebook Likes and page activity positively correlate with his 2008 Presidential Election win, supporters may be using Facebook and other social media sites as a place to gather and share support of a candidate rather than as a forum to discuss substantive issues (Woolley et al, 2010). And the same is likely to be true of Trump supporters' social media use. Furthermore, while young adults may be using social media increasingly to participate in some form of political discussion, their activities are sometimes referred to as "slacktivism" (Vitak et al, 2011). Slacktivism describes online participation, such as signing petitions and joining online groups, that leads to little real world impact. Vitak suggests that while these actions may have little political impact, activities that increase political engagement of young adults, like debating on Facebook, might act as a forum to train youth to develop civic skills. However, Kushin et al (2010) argue that political self-efficacy, the sense that an individual can have a true impact on the political process, is not associated with social media usage. Increased political self-efficacy and situational political involvement (one's ability to discern an issue's relevance in social situations) are positively associated with Internet sites that are more reflective of traditional media sources rather than social media sites.

One negative effect of social media on political participation and outlook appears to be their contributing to the phenomenon of "fandom politics." Social media generally covers similar issues as traditional media (Metzgar et al, 2009), however, because social media sites operate with no strict hierarchy, party representations on social media sites have become increasingly populist

(Chadwick et al, 2016). The proliferation of social media and the rise of populist movements online have allowed for the rise of “fandom politics,” (Bronstein, 2013) which allow supporters to engage in a form of political participation that has more in common with cheering for a local sports team than with rational political interest. Fandom politics relies on supporters discouraging dissent within the party while reinforcing affective loyalty to the party candidate. The rise of fandom politics may explain Donald Trump’s success in the 2016 Republican Primary and eventual presidential victory. To counter negative media stories, Trump embraced social media and released “tweetstorms” (Wells et al, 2016). These tweetstorms allowed Trump to rewrite history, possibly creating an alternate story, and encouraging his supporters to further his narratives by retweeting or sharing.

One of the challenges facing the study of internet campaigns is that social media platforms and the internet itself change so rapidly that many strategies become dated soon after they are deployed, and new possibilities are constantly emerging. For the purpose of keeping up with the latest trends in the internet and social media politics and activism, we made observations of the websites and the Facebook, Twitters, and Instagram pages of what were the nine leading candidates in the US presidential primary races between January 20th and February 10th of 2016. The candidates were Hilary Clinton (D), Bernie Sanders (D), Martin O’Malley (D), Donald Trump (R), Ted Cruz (R), Marco Rubio (R), Ben Carson (R), Chris Christie (R), and Jeb Bush (R).

During the period of the study we observed each site on a daily basis, tracking the number of postings, Facebook likes, and Twitter and Instagram followers. We also took initial screenshots of the sites, and then took new screenshots each time major elements were changed. At least once during or soon following the observation period we took an inventory of the content of each of the sites. The inventory was informed by the work of Denning (2000) who identified “five modes” of internet activism: collection of information, publication of information, dialogue, coordinating action, lobbying decision makers. Warren et al (2014), find that the activists they interviewed use the internet in all five ways. We created an expanded list of nine functions that social media and web-based engagements can fulfill for campaigns, and then looked at the specific ways that the sites performed each.

Here is a list of the nine functions and the information we collected from each candidate in connection with each function in our inventory:

1) *Collection of information*: Campaigns collect information about supporters and potential supporters both by asking them to voluntarily provide it and by tracking data about site visits, likes, re-tweets, etc. We collected information about whether the candidates requested email and regular mail addresses, surveyed user opinions, asked for Facebook likes and Twitter and Instagram followers, and asked users to add their names to lists of volunteers and committed voters.

2) *Image Maintenance*: Campaigns, candidates, and organizations create and maintain a public image in a huge number of ways, including choice of logo and tag line, pictures, media clips, biography and self-description, and even merchandizing choices. We collected information of the campaigns' logos, slogans, use of pictures of the candidate and followers, endorsements, whether they chose to be designated a "politician" or a "public figure" on Facebook, and merchandise. See the appendix for the image data for the top three candidates from each party.

3) *Publication of information*: In a way that is ideally harmonious with image and brand strategies, campaigns publish information about the candidates, events, policy positions, and the opposition. For instance, campaign sites typically have an "Events" button that leads to a page of upcoming events, and a "Bio" button that lead to a biography of the candidate. We collected information about whether and how candidates announced events, and about the volume of their social media posting between January 15 and February 1.

4) *Public Dialogue*: Candidates invite public dialogue and try to steer online conversations through posts and tweets, likes and shares, comments and responses. We attempted to collect information about the volume of shares, and likes of individual posts for each candidate, but found that it was beyond our capacity to track this.

5) *Changing Public Opinion*: Campaigns try to win supporters and turn opinion against their opponents through providing information, making arguments, displaying strength of support, attacking opponents, and by other means. We got a general sense of the content of candidate posts, but found that it was beyond our capacity to do a systematic content analysis of all the ways candidates attempted to influence public opinion.

6) *Coordinating Online Action*: Many campaigns seek to get supporters to do things which can easily be done on their computers without leaving their homes, such as like and share posts, sign petitions, and make contributions with credit cards. We collected information about whether candidate sites asked users to share content, donate, or sign an online petition.

7) *Coordinating Offline Action*: Many campaigns also seek to get their supporters to do things in the "real" offline world, like vote, show up at rallies, and put signs up in their yards. These tasks most frequently require more commitment than online actions. We collected information about whether candidate websites asked users to vote, attend events, or volunteer.

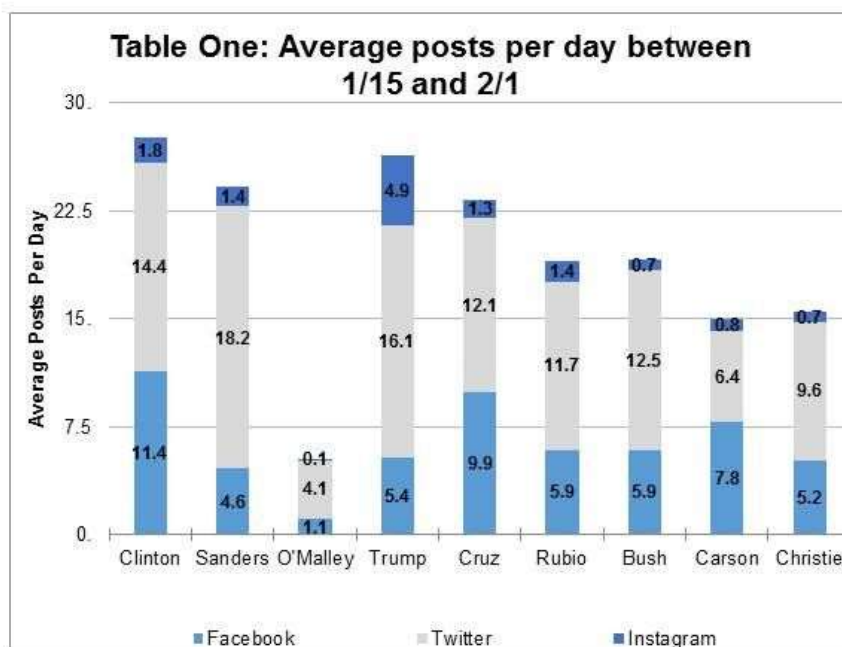
8) *Lobbying Decision Makers*: Cause campaigns frequently have a central aim of influencing elected officials and other decision makers. But even political candidates sometimes make a show of encouraging or dissuading public figures, including other candidates, concerning high-profile decisions. Trump, for instance, at least made a show of trying to convince Clinton to use the phrase "radical Islamic terrorists." We did not attempt to collect information about this function.

9) *Fundraising*: Finally, now more than ever, campaigns need money. Social media and web-based campaigning has been particularly successful at providing the means for many individuals to make small donations.¹ We collected information about whether candidate websites had a donation button, and whether and how they solicited donations.

Much of what we observed was not particularly remarkable. Most of the sites had candidate biographies and pictures, had buttons to donate and volunteer, and solicited the email and street addresses of supporters. However, the exercise has enabled us to offer a useful overview of the online presence of each of the campaigns, as well as a number of lessons about good and bad practices that were apparent in our observations. Because this is an exploratory and practice-oriented study, we did not do rigorous quantitative analysis of variance or run significance tests, but we are able to offer some descriptive statistics about each campaign. We believe that this study raises a number of questions that might merit further study using such techniques.

Campaign Overviews

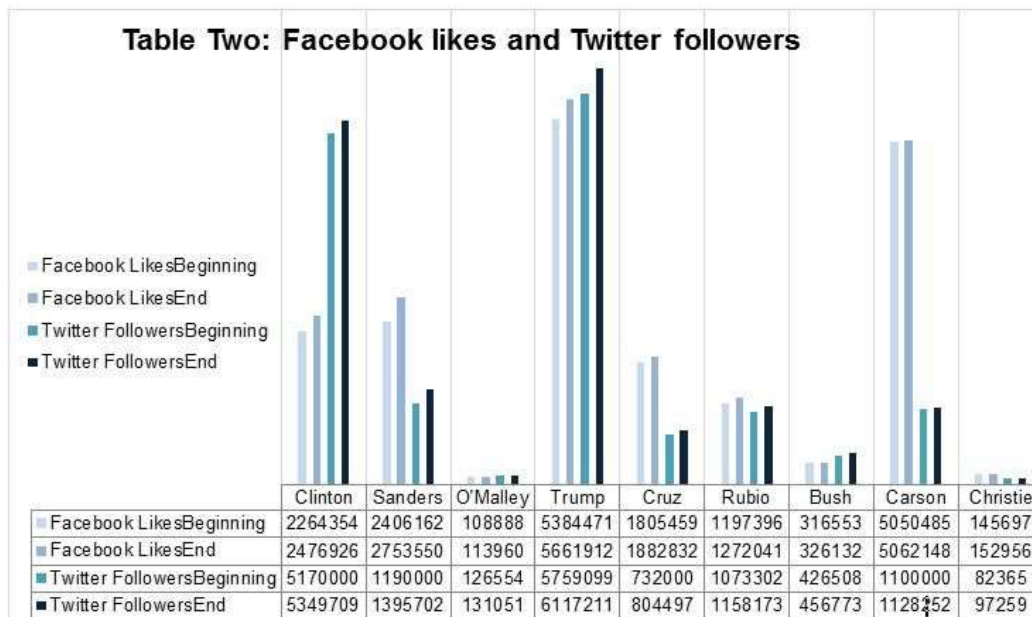
We calculated the average posts per day for the period between January 15 and February 1, both total and by social media platform. The results are presented in Table One.



¹ The Federal Election Commission provides data on amounts and sizes of campaign contributions (see <http://www.fec.gov/disclosure/pnational.do>).

There are two striking things about these results. The first is that the overall number of posts seemed to be closely related to the overall success of the campaigns. Clinton, Trump, Sanders and Cruz, in that order, had the highest daily averages, and were ranked in the polls in the same order. We are not at all claiming that more posting creates success, indeed the relationship may be just the opposite, with the biggest and best funded campaigns being able to afford enough staff to generate a lot of daily posts. But it is also true that a well-funded campaign that neglected social media would be missing an important marker of success. Secondly, we noticed that the most successful “outside” candidates, Trump and Sanders, had the strongest presence on Twitter. It is unclear whether the short format of Twitter tweets and the lure of following the hashtags of strangers has a particular affinity for anti-establishment politics, or if this is just a feature of the current election. But, as of now, it appears the establishment is being dismantled 140 characters at a time.

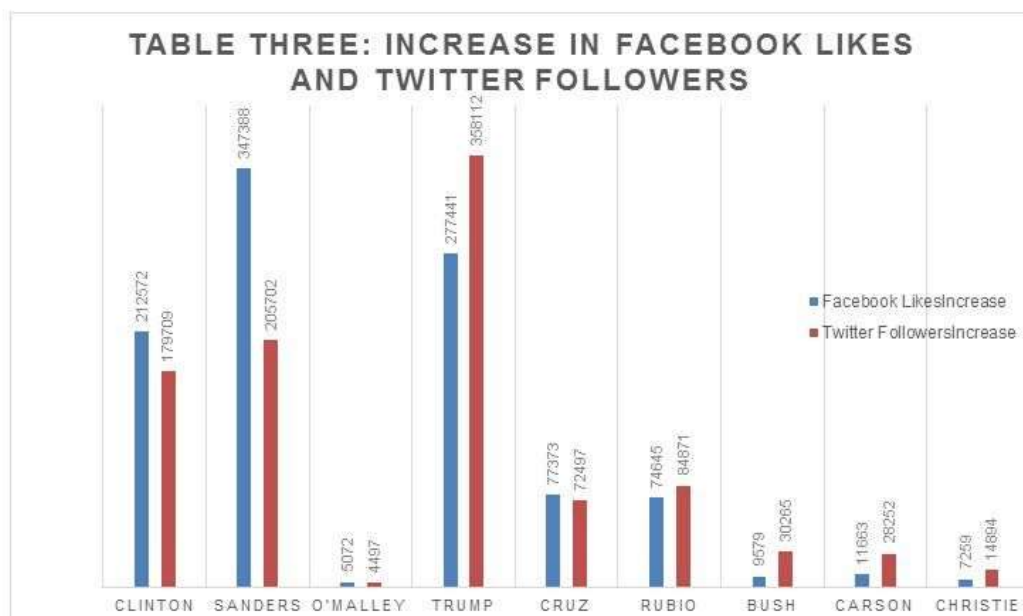
In addition to counting daily posts, we also collected data on the number of Facebook likes and Twitter Followers at the beginning and the end of the study period (January 15 to February 10). These data are presented in Table Two.



Two features seem noteworthy: 1) The number of posts per day, shown in Table One, seems to have little to do with the number of likes and followers in Twitter and Facebook. Clinton has far more Twitter followers than Facebook likes, but tweets only moderately more. Sanders had more Facebook likes than Twitter followers, but was for more engaged on Twitter. This is also true of Cruz. 2) Different candidates have markedly different social media profiles. Caron’s Facebook presence was second only to Trump, but his Twitter following was just

about average for the field. Trump displayed strength in both Facebook and Twitter, while many other candidates were far stronger on one platform than on the other. The meaning of these observations is unclear, but it certainly raises some provocative questions about whether the success of candidates with various segments of voters might be predicted by social media profiles. For instance, perhaps Trump’s strong early showing on both Facebook and Twitter were indicative of his unexpected success going forward. So too perhaps was the ability of Clinton, Sanders, and Trump to add likes and followers.

Table Three shows the increase in Facebook likes and Twitter followers for each candidate in raw numbers.



The biggest increases seem to be associated with the strongest campaigns and the highest overall daily posting rates, but again the increases on Facebook and Twitter are not consistently proportional to daily postings on those platforms. Especially in light of the ultimate results of the presidential election, we feel that the rate at which candidates were able to increase their following is perhaps an especially good indicator of popular support for them.

Lessons for internet activists

We drew a number of lessons for internet activists from our observations of the websites and social media accounts of the nine campaigns. These lessons are based on the inventories of the websites and social media accounts of the candidates that were built around the nine functions, as we have described above. The full data that we collected on the image of selected candidates can

be found in the appendices. As we analyzed the data we had collected it became clear that the nine functions are highly interconnected. The same site content can easily play a role in fulfilling two or more of the functions. For instance, choices about merchandizing contribute both to fundraising and to image maintenance. The following lessons, then, are best practices that became apparent as we shifted through the data from the survey that we had organized around the nine functions of web-based engagement and social media use for campaigns.

Lesson #1: Project a strategic image by coordinating elements

Many campaigns coordinated such elements as logo, slogan, pictures, self-descriptions, merchandise and endorsements to build candidates' images. We believe that it is generally a good practice to have all elements work together to promote a consistent image. For example, Ben Carson's campaign built on his background as a doctor in several ways. His slogan was "Heal, Inspire, Revive," suggesting that he would heal the politically ill nation as he had healed physically ill patients. His was the only campaign to offer scrubs for sale as part of the campaign merchandise. The popular "These Hands" meme associated with the campaign featured pictures of Carson and his followers holding their palms open to show the words, "These" on one palm, and "Hands" on the other. Between Carson's palms is the word "Heal." Hillary Clinton's campaign used different elements to highlight her in traditional feminine roles. Her Twitter blurb put her roles as wife, mother, and first lady before those of Senator and Secretary of State. On Instagram, she lists herself as a "doting grandmother, among other things." Pictures of her with Bill and or Chelsea are frequent, and among the merchandise she offers is a pillow with the phrase "A Woman's Place is in the White House" embroidered on the front in needlepoint. Other elements of Clinton's campaign complement her foregrounding of feminine roles with the suggestion of strong leadership. Such elements include the slogan "I'm with her," and the logo with its strong graphic element of a bold arrow crossing an "H." Ted Cruz attempted to project a woodsy conservatism (not to mention strong support for the NRA) by featuring camouflage hunter's hats and mugs and through the prominent endorsement of Duck Dynasty's Phil Robertson.

One minor but interesting point about candidate image: Facebook provides the option of a candidate choosing either the designation "politician" or "public figure." Most career politicians chose the designation "politician." Republican outsiders Carson and Trump plausibly called themselves "public figures" rather than "politicians," but surprisingly, and less plausibly, so did Jeb Bush.

See the appendixes for full data on image for the top candidates.

Lesson #2: Use website elements to promote real-world action

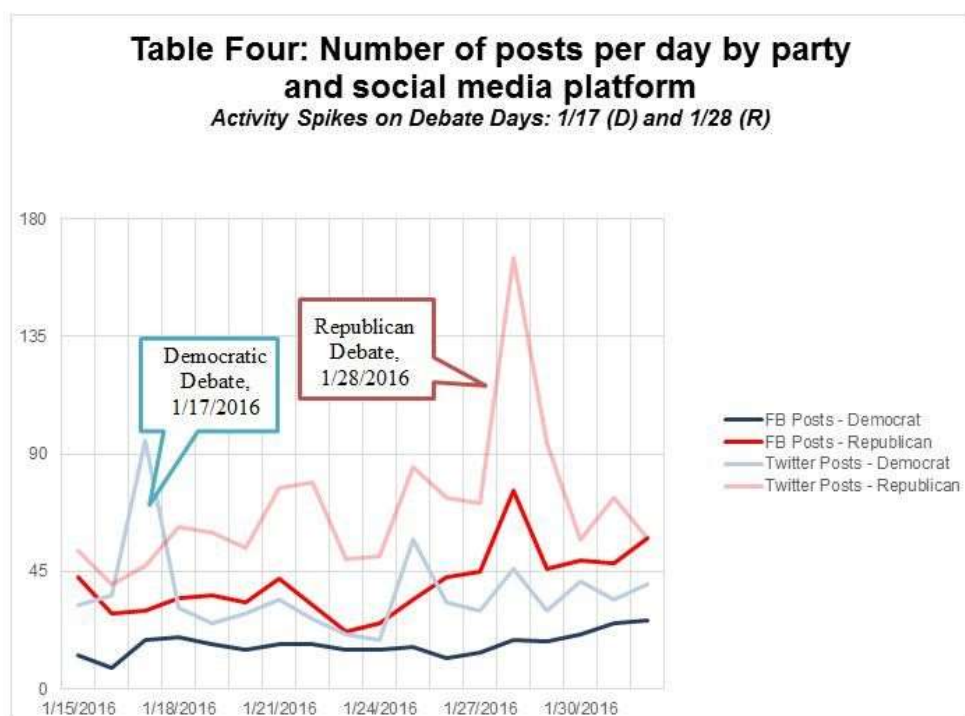
Campaigns worked through social media and candidate web sites to promote specific real world actions. In this way, the online and social media campaigns worked to counter “slacktivism.” The most important real-world action that a political campaign can hope to promote is, of course, voting. Clinton’s campaign worked across platforms to count down to election, reminding anyone who visited her campaign page, Twitter or Facebook sites how many days it was until the primary. The banners on all these sites were updated every day to read, “3 Days to Iowa,” “2 Days to Iowa,” and “1 Day to Iowa” as appropriate. All these sites also thanked voters after Clinton’s (narrow) Iowa victory. We observed the same pattern with the run-up to the New Hampshire primary, in which Clinton placed behind Sanders. Although no other campaign had as systematic a cross-platform countdown to the primary, a good number did post instructions on how to participate in the Iowa caucuses.

Beside getting out the vote, campaign websites also encourage followers to turn out at candidate rallies and appearances. While the campaign pages of Clinton, Cruz, Carson and others provided clear information about upcoming events, only Trump’s site “sold” free tickets to the events. We felt this was probably an effective way of encouraging participation and turn-out because it requires that prospective attendees make a commitment to attend while they are on the site, and provides them with a printable ticket to remind them to show up.

Lesson #3: Use postings to highlight and respond to real-world events

Table Four displays an analysis of postings per day that shows that candidates had the highest number of social media postings on the days of their part debates (1/17 for the Democrats and 1/28 for the Republicans).

Candidates used social media posts to highlight the positives aspects of their own performance, and also to call attention to the gaffs and failures of their opponents. The trend was more pronounced on Twitter than on Facebook, especially among Democrats. In light of the ultimate result of the presidential election it is interesting that Republican candidates out-posted Democratic candidates by a large margin. This is no doubt because there were more Republican candidates, but the volume of posts they generated, regardless of the reasons it was generated, might itself have been an advantage going forward into the general election.



Lesson #4: Build credibility and community by displaying campaign followers

Without exception, every campaign site prominently featured pictures of the candidate addressing large crowds. Such photos display the fact that crowds of people are in fact willing to show up at events to support the candidate and thus build that candidate’s credibility and make it more likely that more people will support him or her. Nothing draws a crowd like a crowd.

In addition to displaying the crowds that candidates were able to attract, some campaign sites also built a sense of community by showing individual supporters or small groups of them. Instagram was an especially useful platform for the display of such photos. While Trump and Cruz’s Instagram pages were taken up largely with themselves, each other, their wives (and later, each other’s wives), Clinton’s and Sanders’ Instagram pages had many pictures of followers and gave good representation to followers who were women, African-American, Hispanic, and of young followers too.

Lesson #5: The web campaign is just one part of the overall campaign

Sometimes, best practices in the use of social media did translate into electoral success, but frequently they did not. Clinton’s well-coordinated cross-platform strategy to mobilizer her supporters to vote did not win her New Hampshire, nor, ultimately, the presidency. Carson’s well-crafted image and strong

following on Facebook did not carry him to victory. Clearly, social media has changed the political process from the door-to-door salesman approach of politicians of old, but has not replaced it completely. Johnson, *et al* (2010) reinforce this sentiment, crediting Obama's success to blending old and new political tactics: "...Obama did not win the presidency because of Facebook...his nomination campaign especially was a well-run, traditional political machine that would have made a 1950s pol proud" (p. 555). Social media have proven effective and necessary in political campaigns, but the political process has not yet evolved to completely eliminate the need for traditional tactics. And while a strong social media performance is a mark of a strong overall political campaign, it does not guarantee success.

Some final observations and questions for further research

There was one prominent practice engaged in by many of the campaigns that the authors were, at best, ambivalent about. The main campaign website of many of the campaigns featured a sort of "pre-front page" that asked potential supporters to provide their name and email before they could even see the campaign site (although there was usually some not-very-obvious way of bypassing this landing). This technique seems to be intended to gather the names and emails of as many potential followers as possible by making it difficult not to provide this information. However, we found it annoying that we could not use the sites to find out about the candidates without making a commitment to the candidate. We wonder how many potential supporters were alienated by this rather aggressive information-gathering tactic.

Beyond this single feature, our observations have raised a number of questions that might merit future research. These questions include the nature and strength of the relationship between social media followings, poll numbers, and election results. Trump's strong early performance in social media now seems to have been indicative of his future success, but it is unclear whether Twitter followers and Facebook likes are as important as the sheer number of mentions of a candidate in posts, or the liking and sharing of political posts. The rate at which candidates increased their followings struck us as an especially important indicator of their potential, but this hypothesis is in need of more rigorous confirmation. It might also be worth asking whether the differing strengths of candidates by social media platforms is associated with popularity among different segments of the voting public. And it would be interesting to know whether social media standing was a leading or lagging indicator of public opinion as measured through polls. All these questions would require more data and rigorous quantitative analysis to answer. It would also be interesting to test the effectiveness of some of those best practices we have written about through experimental means. For instance, is the pre-front page technique really more effective than other means of gathering follower information? How many potential followers does it turn away? An experimental study could easily be designed to answer such questions.

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About the authors

David C. Hoffman is an Associate Professor in the Austin Marxe School of Public and International Affairs of Baruch College, CUNY. Contact: David.Hoffman AT baruch.cuny.edu.

Danny Lundy is pursuing his Master's of Public Administration at the Austin Marxe School of Public and International Affairs at Baruch College, CUNY. Contact: dannyr.l.8 AT gmail.com

Amanda Anderson is a Social Media Consultant, a Contributing Editor at the *American Journal of Nursing*, and a Project Manager at Mount Saini Beth Israel Hospital. Contact: amandajandersonrn AT gmail.com

Michael Lanza is pursuing his Master's of Public Administration at the Austin Marxe School of Public and International Affairs at Baruch College, CUNY. Contact: michael.lanza317 AT gmail.com

Appendix 1

Candidate	Party	Logo Description	Slogan(s)	Facebook Description	Politician or Public Figure on Facebook	Twitter Description	Instagram Description	Key Endorsements	Signature Merchandise	Look and Feel
Clinton	D	Uppercase letter "H" with an arrow inside pointing forward	"I'm With Her"	Wife, mom, grandma, women+kids advocate, FLOTUS, SecState, hair icon, pantsuit aficionado, 2016 presidential candidate.	Politician	Wife, mom, grandma, women+kids advocate, FLOTUS, Senator, SecState, hair icon, pantsuit aficionado, 2016 presidential candidate, Tweets from Hillary signed	Hillary Clinton: Doting grandmother, among other things. #hillary2016	Bill & Chelsea, Katie Perry, Demi Lovato, Lena Dunham, Cory Booker, Madeline Albright, Jamie Lee Curtis, Eric Garner's Mother and others	Stitch throw pillow, "A woman's place is in the White House," shirts, lots and lots of buttons, signs, bags, you name it.	Bright blue tones; pictures of Clinton reaching out to supporters and standing close to people; many banners feature supporters without Clinton.
Sanders	D	Last name in white or blue or other coloring, with a star replacing the dot in the letter "i". Red, white and blue slight waves underneath, "2016" below that.	"A Political Revolution is Coming" "Bet on Bernie" "A Future to Believe In" "Feel the Bern"	This is the official campaign page for Bernie 2016.	Politician	Join our campaign for president at http://bernieanders.com . Tweets by staff.	Bernie Sanders: We're gonna have fun, We're gonna make a political revolution. We're gonna transform America. Other than that, not much. Berniesanders.com	Ben Jealous, Emily Ratajkowska (model), Red Hot Chili Peppers, Harry Belafonte, Keith Ellison, Eric Garner's daughter, Susan Sarandon, Roule Grijalva, state political officials	Shirts, mugs, signs, the usual	Blue tones; many pictures of Sanders speaking to crowds, making dramatic gestures with his arms

Appendix 2

Candidate	Party	Logo Description	Slogan(s)	Facebook Description	Politician or Public Figure on Facebook	Twitter Description	Instagram Description	Key Endorsements	Signature Merchandise	Look and Feel
Trump	R	Last name in white, block lettering; all uppercase.	"Make America Great Again"	This is the official Facebook page for Donald J. Trump	Public Figure	"MakeAmericaGreatAgain #Trump2016"	None	Yes, Sarah Palin, Jerry Falwell Jr., Willie Robertson (from Duck Dynasty), Aissa Wayne (John Wayne's Daughter)	Extensive collection of gifts, apparel, signage, headgear, cups, pins ect.	Big and bold; big close ups of Trump; big slogans; big crown
Cruz	R	Name with no space between first and last. "2016" above the "z" in last name, flame in red, white and blue with a star before the name.	"TRUSTED" "Courageous Conservatives" "Reigniting the Promise of America"	US Senator from Texas and candidate for the Republican nomination for President of the United States	Politician	Father of two, @heidiscruz's husband, US Senator, fighter for liberty, candidate for President with @CarlyFrom a for VP to bring back Jobs, Freedom & Security	Ted Cruz, US Senator and candidate for the Republican nomination for President. cruzcrew.com/26 CxTJob	Phil Robertson (Duck Dynasty), Glen Beck, Steve King (US Rep), Senator Mike Lee	Hunters' Gear, hats, mugs, signs	Stark and Dramatic: Cruz alone is the spotlight; Cruz speaking to a crowd; black and white photos.
Rubio	R	Lowercase, soft lettering, outline of us replaces the dot in "i", first name is red, last name in blue, "a new american century" written beneath.	"A New American Century"	I'm running for President of the United States to ensure A New American Century.	Politician	US Senator for Florida. Follow @SenRubio Press for more updates.	None	Nikki Haley, Tim Scott, Trey Gowdy, John Kyl--SC primary coming up-- local politicians, Pawn Stars personality, George Pataki	Hats, scarfs, the usual plus gift cards and store memberships.	Pictures of Rubio speaking or standing against red, white and blue backgrounds.
Carson	R	Bold, black uppercase lettering, first name in red, last name in blue; "for president 2016" and "Heal, Inspire, Revive" written beneath in red, blue and light blue.	"Heal, Inspire, Revive." There was no tie in to the "These Hands" campaign on the websites.	Official Facebook page of Dr. Ben Carson.	Public Figure	The Official Twitter Page of Dr. Ben Carson. Connect on Facebook; http://www.facebook.com/realben Carson	Dr. Ben Carson: Hear the story leading up to the 2013 National Prayer Breakfast. Click here: crsn.co/PrayerBr eakfast13	None	Usual, plus scrubs and onesies	Femal studio portraits: sitting and standing, empty backgrounds. Features a portrait photo holding handwritten sign saying "In God We Trust."