

Conditions of Campaigning in Dissonant Public Spheres and Crisis of Democracy

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Political campaigns have always been closely related to the technical conditions of media infrastructures, the social conditions of voters, and the political opportunities within which parties and movements compete. As campaigning has developed through the four ages of political communication (Blumler, 2015; Norris, 2002), it is now shaped by the affordances of digital platforms and networked communication ecologies in addition to legacy media infrastructures. In the environment of hybrid media systems (Chadwick, 2013), campaigning has also become hybrid – a task divided between the use of conventional information subsidies and the dynamics of social media and digital platforms (Azari, 2016; Wells et al., 2016). What is more, contemporary political communications and voter mobilization are taking place under two significant context conditions: dissonant public spheres (Pfetsch, 2018) are coinciding with a profound crisis of liberal democracy (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). The communication ecology and the state of democracy have produced a style of campaigning that is no longer geared toward a consensus among the established political elites and parties to engage in civilized speech, to conduct fair competition, and to stay within the limits and norms of democracy.

In this essay, I shall discuss some of the features and consequences of these contextual conditions. I shall further argue that the coincidence of disrupted democracy and dissonant public spheres is related to profound structural changes in the party organization, campaigning and political leadership.

Conditions of Dissonant Public Spheres

In contrast to the idealized version of a deliberative democratic public sphere, communication in dissonant public spheres is defined by a multitude of sounds and voices, fragmented actor constellations, parallel issue agendas, diverting or contradictory opinions, and conflicting interests. This heterogeneity encourages new forms of disintermediation and simultaneously enhances fragmentation and segmentation of publics. Such public spheres cater to the disparate short-term communication strategies of political elites (Napoli, 2010), as they are confronted with the rapid, random interaction of digital media, online channels, and traditional media.

Dissonant public spheres come with noise levels and communication modes that easily exceed the limits of civilized speech and argument. The commentary function of social media hardly prevents uncivil, transgressive, or hateful speech, and these messages move faster and

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with higher turnover. As a result, the filtering mechanisms of digital platforms are unable to shield users from fake news, rumors, and false statements (Kim et al., 2021). In electoral campaigns, the use of data for dark ads and micro-targeting allows for individualized message content and diversity according to social but also political selection criteria. Since the message flow is not transparent, it is difficult to control what groups of users are being fed what kind of messages.

New actors – such as influencers, bloggers, citizen journalists, political entrepreneurs, and activists – may interfere and receive much more attention and clicks than traditional party elites. Social networks and video platforms make it easy for them to build up “alternative” political communities on issues that compromise or even disrupt the traditional parties’ campaigns (Hughes, 2016). These actors may impose on campaign agendas as their issues and frames go viral and suddenly turn traditional agendas upside down.

Linkage to Democracy

Dissonant public spheres, in the naive sense, may be considered an opportunity for democratic opening-up of communication spaces, breaking the monopoly of the established parties and crusted party systems in liberal democracy. However, we note the coincidence of dissonant public spheres and a rather severe crisis of democracy, which sheds new light on the entanglements of political mobilization in digital environments and political culture. Thus, as political communication has become more fluid and volatile through digital media, so have party systems in Europe undergone profound changes as well.

Studies by Kriesi and Hutter (2019) have demonstrated that new cleavage structures and conflict lines have emerged in liberal democracies across Europe. The new cleavage divides the winners and losers of globalization, and its emergence shakes the traditional former party systems to the ground. While this development plays out differently by country according to post-democratic traditions and political cultures across Europe, the common denominator has been more polarization within established party systems: the emergence or success of new far right-wing parties at the fringes, the decline of social democratic or left parties, and the movement of centrist parties to more radical or populist positions. This does not only mean that considerable voter segments in European countries are choosing far right-wing or populist parties to represent them. Rather, the trust in democracy as a political order itself has declined, and in some countries, support for autocratic leadership has increased (Foa & Mounk, 2016, 2017) so that some authors speak of a “cultural backlash” (Norris & Inglehart, 2018) against liberal democracy.

Changes in Party Systems and Parties

The concurrence of threatened democracy and the dissonant public sphere heats up the attention economy in which political campaigns operate. Since campaigns, by their very nature, are dynamic and highly dependent on their political contexts, campaigning in this political environment has become more vulnerable to political cynicism and polarization. At the same time, the traditional parties must cope with a transforming communication environment that implies not only the multitude and inherent tension of hybrid media and their logics but also the increasing influence of algorithms with opaque modes of operation (Schäfer, 2021, p. 11). These

conditions require parties to adapt their messages and tools of communication, as well as their organization, to the new situation.

Chadwick and Stromer-Galley (2016) show that parties relocate and become more like movements that play back not only onto the political competition and how it is being conducted but also into the organization itself. The norms of decision-making and former party hierarchies can be sidestepped by party communication and campaign strategists. The movement character also implies that parties feel they can easily jump on the populist bandwagon to satisfy the requests of grassroots and new voter segments. As parties become increasingly movement-oriented, their boundaries become porous, and their identities may be subject to change. At the same time, tensions arise between control and interactivity of campaigns, between practices of inner-organizational hierarchy and decision-making and adaptation to requests of active supporters from outside. This is to the detriment of coherent ideological beliefs and formal inner party decision-making rules. It also means that a new type of party leadership and personalized campaigns gain importance. As the career and success of political outsiders such as Bolsonaro, Trump, Corbyn or Kurz demonstrate, populist styles of leadership mean breaking with former cultures and traditions and ideologies of parties and instead forcing the party into compromising with populist styles of leadership based on the heated logic of social media communication. Thus, it is interesting to note that in the European election of 2019, the social media communication of far-right parties converged in two issues: the emphasis on immigration as a threat and the insistence on elite-blaming (Heft et al., 2023).

In addition to the political dynamics, the professional practices of campaigning are subject to change as data-driven campaigns become the standard of political mobilization. Campaigns become more data-intensive, and it is possible to use the analytic strategies as technical tools and algorithmic structures. A recent study (Schäfer, 2021) illustrates that in the UK and Germany, campaign managers cope with dissonant public spheres and with the info-economic logics of algorithms by developing heuristics to overcome their ignorance about the precise working of the algorithms. Thus, campaigns become subject to communication strategies such as trial and error to see what works for the party in the competition and in response to the public reaction and digital logics.

Whether this campaigning style further damages democracy is largely an open question. However, it seems that in dissonant public spheres, the democratic roles and functions of professional journalism (as compared to arbitrary digital communication) have become more important than before. Even if public service media have become gatewatchers (Bruns, 2018) in digital political communication, they must be called upon as the custodians of democratic political culture, thereby fencing political speech against undemocratic manipulation, fake information, and the transgressions of dissonant public spheres. It is therefore alarming to note that Reporters Without Borders testify to “a sizable deterioration” of media freedom and journalism in Europe. Public service media have come under political pressure or financial threats in many European countries, such as Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and the UK, or have been threatened by autocratic leaders or governments, such as in Hungary and Poland. Even in Europe, it is not beyond imagination for journalists’ lives to be taken, as in Slovenia, Malta, Sweden, Northern Ireland, and the Netherlands, or threatened,

as in Germany, France, Italy, Poland, Greece, Serbia, and Bulgaria (Reporters Without Borders Report, 2021).

Conclusion

All in all, the coincidence of dissonant public spheres and disrupted democracy has contributed to specific context conditions for political campaigning, which supposedly make political mobilization in liberal democracy more vulnerable to the attention economy of digital platforms, short-term influences of agendas by political outsiders, and manipulation. At the same time, the logic of dissonant public spheres has diminished the importance of individual campaigns. Since the mechanisms of sorting and evaluating information and opinion – formerly played by traditional media – have become relative, political parties face rivalry of short-term movements, counter publics on the left and right, and communities that oppose democratic order itself. Campaign strategists appear to act on heuristics of trial and error, thereby testing more personalized and less issue-driven campaigns, more interactivity, and more popular appeal. In already dissonant public spheres, this campaign style adds to the noise rather than managing information on political alternatives and enhancing public understanding of politics. In this situation, professional journalists, public intellectuals, and independent political actors who respect democratic institutions and norms are needed now more than ever as critical voices to observe and to guide campaigners in coping with the information tide and disorder of the digital attention economy.

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