



Data Ops, Objectivity, and Outsiders: Journalistic Coverage of Data Campaigning

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ABSTRACT

The last decade has seen the meteoric rise of data campaigning as a central concern of political campaigns. This article offers insight into how journalists and political professionals construct practices of data campaigning as all-powerful despite the limited empirical findings to that effect. Specifically, this research delves into how journalistic coverage of campaigns' use of data and analytics has often relied on inflated accounts of the objectivity of analytics, the belief that more data necessarily means more and better knowledge, and narratives of objective outsiders – notably geeks, hackers, nerds, and scientists – that situate analytics staffers as strange and different, and as uniquely qualified to access the truth. To do this, I engage in critical discourse analysis of popular coverage of the data campaigning in the US in the years 2008–2016. Ultimately, denaturalizing these narratives helps reveal how they contribute to defining this “new” campaign strategy as fundamentally concerned with finding objective answers to solvable problems and are key to political professionals' maintenance of organizational power.

KEYWORDS

Political campaigning; data campaigning; digital politics; big data; microtargeting

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Introduction

From websites to social media to analytics, digital tools have long been pitched to – and by – political campaigns as revolutionary. In reality, they are far more evolutionary, allowing campaigns to make improvements and additions to traditional tactics and goals. Data-driven campaigning, the latest such revolutionary practice, has been extolled by journalists as a main reason for victory by the 2008 Obama campaign, the 2012 Obama campaign, and the 2016 Trump campaign, as well as an advantage for the Clinton 2016 campaign throughout most of the race. Arguments about the strong effects of novel data- and analytics-backed practices were especially prominent following Trump's 2016 victory, with claims by the campaign that their Facebook targeting practices won them the election being repeated by journalists across a variety of outlets (Balz & Rucker, 2016; Grassegger & Krogerus, 2017; Halpern, 2017).

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Knowledge of when, how, and if data campaigning works is more complicated, however. On one hand, data campaigning has led to empirically supported findings regarding how to optimize field organizing in particular, and improve voter turnout across in-person and mediated channels generally, leading to analytics-backed best practices that draw on reams of data found in voter files and party databases (Gerber & Green, 2017; Malhotra,

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Michelson, Rogers, & Valenzuela, 2011; Michelson & Nickerson, 2011; Nickerson & Rogers, 2010, 2014). On the other, little is known about targeting for persuasive outcomes or social media ads in general. While developments have been meaningful, especially as they relate to efforts to mobilize voters on Election Day (Haenschen & Jennings, 2019) the known impact of data-driven social media tactics is not equivalent to the headlines. This paper is less concerned with documenting if and when the data campaign has the power to change electoral outcomes, and instead asks how journalists and staffers construct practices of data campaigning as powerful despite the limited empirical findings to that effect. To do so, I investigate how journalists have publicized and proclaimed the tactics and strategies associated with digital- and analytics-based campaigning, tracing the cultural history of data campaigning through journalistic articles, tell-all books and interviews about campaigns, and strategy de-briefs written for popular consumption following US elections in the years 2008–2016.

By studying the practices and claims of political professionals as their actions are translated and publicized by journalists, I will show how journalistic accounts of data campaigning have contributed to a narrative that emphasizes the primacy and power of data itself. Highlighting themes across coverage from 2008–2016, my work shows that accounts of campaigns' use of data and analytics often rely on inflated positivist accounts of the objectivity of analytics, the belief that more data necessarily means more and better knowledge, and narratives of objective outsiders – notably geeks, hackers, nerds, and scientists – that situate analytics staffers as strange and different, and as uniquely qualified to access the truth. These narratives are important not only because they present data-oriented practices as powerful but because they contribute to a view of data campaigning as objective and pragmatic; full of correct and incorrect options and largely dependent on the size of datasets available, rather than a fundamentally persuasive endeavor that is fraught with unknowability and gray areas surrounding both the ethics and the efficacy of persuasive appeals. Moreover, it presents a masculine image of the staffers who are best-equipped to do this type of work, often relying on gendered tropes from geek culture. Coverage of campaign technologies and digital strategy often laminates these narratives of objective, scientific positivism, and hacker magic together, presenting the digital campaign and its staffers with a combination of mysticism and empiricism that is wholly new to campaigns and necessarily powerful.

Literature Review: Studying and Constructing the Data Campaign

As political campaigns have increasingly emphasized data-driven campaigning, the field of political communication has also taken up the task of studying these efforts. This scholarship largely falls into one of the three genres. First, experimental work that measures the efficacy of data-driven tactics or is aimed at assessing and improving best practices for campaigns. Second, more descriptive scholarship focusing on the development and practice of data-driven campaigning as a strategy, focusing on its implications for norms of campaign content and practices, campaigns as organizations, and democracy more broadly. Third, critical analyses of particular campaign practices often synthesized through lenses of policy concerns and normative democratic principles.

Experimental work on data campaigning has tested which data matter to campaigns' desired outcomes, from fundraising to electoral victory, and how campaigns can develop

best practices for campaigning using data. To this end, a wealth of field experiments concerning best practices related to field organizing and communication teams have developed findings that are themselves data-driven, such as which medium to use to contact supporters, and what scripts to use in those contacts in order to improve voter turnout (Gerber & Green, 2017; Haenschen & Jennings, 2019; Konitzer, Rothschild, Hill, & Wilbur, 2019; Malhotra et al., 2011; Michelson & Nickerson, 2011; Nickerson & Rogers, 2010, 2014). Campaigns' findings about specifics like which e-mail subject lines or buttons work best to fundraise are often proprietary or only shared with fellow partisan organizations, and have also been found to change over short amounts of time, requiring constant reevaluation rather than clear best practices (Karpf, 2016). Overall, this experimental work has found that sophisticated uses of data have effects mostly when put toward mobilizing supportive action from existing supporters, such as targeting likely supporters for GOTV efforts and fundraising, and less sophisticated use of A/B testing can improve fundraising, as well as smaller-scale supporter mobilization from supporters, like e-mail sign-ups (Nickerson & Rogers, 2014). Even in mobilizing supporter turnout, where data is most useful, Hersh's (2015) work highlights the fact that publicly available data points, such as voter registration history and census information, not highly detailed "microtargeting" data, are useful for mobilizing turnout. One thing that is clear is that no matter the amount or granularity of data used to target, it is exceptionally hard to persuade people (Kalla & Broockman, 2018), even for those who hold policy interests that diverge from their chosen party (Endres & Panagopoulos, 2019). Moreover, persuasion efforts risk backlash if targeted at the wrong people (Nickerson & Rogers, 2014).¹ Together, this research tells us that data campaigning largely adheres to a limited effects model, and only has effects for some goals, and under specific, and often difficult-to-achieve circumstances, rather than being universally effective.

A significant body of work has focused on documenting the ways campaigns execute practices associated with data-driven campaigning, regardless of their measurable effects. Those focusing on organizational questions have detailed how data-driven practices have grown in advocacy organizations (Karpf, 2016), how digital infrastructure at the party level facilitates – or stymies – the development of meaningful and innovative digital strategy (Kreiss, 2016), and how campaigns have adopted and failed to adopt data-driven advertising (Dommett & Power, 2019), message testing (Baldwin-Philippi, 2016, 2017), and GOTV practices (Nielsen, 2012). Repeatedly, work of this sort has shown that uptake of data practices is arduous and often slow in all but the most well-funded of presidential campaigns. Others have studied the content, creators, and audiences of targeted ads, finding generic, national campaign-style narratives rather than highly specific targeting (Anstead, Magalhães, Stupart, & Tambini, 2018), younger potential voters are less likely to be targeted when campaigns use social media microtargeting practices (Endres & Kelly, 2018), and that in 2016, many of the most divisive targeted ads came from non-campaign organizations that broke election law by not filing FEC reports (Kim et al., 2018).

The third body of work, critical in nature, analyses campaign practices through frameworks of normative democratic principles and policy concerns. While this work can often draw on the experimental and descriptive work described above, it focuses more clearly on an assessment of the normative problems or successes of these practices. Arguments about democratic norms often focus on how microtargeting inhibits ideals of public deliberation

and hinders citizens' ability to participate in politics (Barocas, 2012; Howard, 2006; Kreiss, 2012). Normative claims about how persuasion ought to work in a deliberative democracy argue targeted ads' can manipulate people into making political decisions that are uninformed or unsound (Chester & Montgomery, 2017; Susser, Roessler, & Nissenbaum, 2019; Tufekci, 2012). Other frameworks assess practices of data and digital campaigning according to adherence to various ethical principles (Grigoryan, 2019), privacy rights and legal policy (Bennett, 2016), and legal and ethical definitions of consent (Barocas & Nissenbaum, 2014). Much of the work in the second two genres carries an implicit assumption of the effectiveness of these strategies, whether they are celebrated or criticized.

While existing research tells us about how data campaigning is executed, its efficacy, and its possible dangers, it tells us little about how these practices have gained prominence and givenness as a cultural phenomenon. Indeed, journalists have long filled in these blanks, and have a long history of narrating the everyday ins and outs of political campaigns for the public, and even writing profiles that are so prominent and entertaining, they veer into the category of academic and popular literature (Crouse, 1974; Hamby, 2013; McGinnis, 1988; Thompson, 1973; White, 1961). Ultimately, both journalists and political professionals rely on one another to tell the stories the public comes to know about campaigns. In many ways, their interests differ. Campaigns want their organization and candidate to look powerful and poised for success and want to prove their effectiveness to ensure future clients in the next campaign cycle and the lean years in between; journalists need to produce content that assesses, synthesizes, and corrects campaign assertions, rather than parroting them. But their interests rely on some degree of collaboration with each other, too. Journalists need campaigns for more than quotes – for scoops about allies and opponents, expertise about the political procedure and campaign strategy, and the access to get details other journalists cannot. Campaigns rely on journalists to reach the public in a persuasive, seemingly neutral manner. To better understand the narratives these entangled incentives lead to, I argue that political communication ought to go beyond looking at messages and their effectiveness, or even their production. Even if the effects and minutia of data campaigning were better known or more effective, knowledge about how they come to be understood by the public through journalistic coverage would be needed. Journalism about data campaigning is itself a feature of the data-campaigning ecosystem, and we must also study the ways that journalists translate and publicize this work.

As internet studies scholars have detailed, broader discussions of big data often come with “the aura of truth, objectivity, and accuracy” (boyd & Crawford, 2012, p. 663). I am interested in how, rhetorically, such claims to data's power and truth are built within the context of political campaigning. What I argue in this article is not that data campaigning is worthless or even ineffective, but that particular discourses, promoted by campaigns and journalists alike, have been instrumental in imbuing it with a position of power and prominence that far outpaces other campaign practices. This analysis focuses on those rhetorical claims to power – what they look and sound like, and how they frame new and different actors as powerful – rather than effects of power, such as which firms earn more money from their claims of data prowess or who wins elections.

Method: Measuring the Construction of Power in Data Practices

To examine the construction of data practices as powerful, this article analyzes a combination of texts created by journalists and political professionals. This project looks at those articles,

profiles of and interviews with political professionals, as well as strategy de-briefs written for popular public consumption during and following US elections in the years 2008–2016 (and those detailing the uptake of US-based practices abroad). As I am interested in how public discourse looks, I was less concerned with ensuring an exhaustive study of the universe of journalistic stories or documenting wire stories, and more concerned with ensuring that major profiles or coverage that might stand outside the bounds of “traditional” journalism were included. To work around this issue, I used Google News and its advanced search capabilities to search for articles and interviews about data and digital campaigning during and immediately following each presidential campaign cycle from 2008–2016 (from Jan 1 of election year to Feb 28 of inauguration year). I chose presidential cycles due to the amount of attention garnered by national news outlets, as well as the fact that down-ballot races have lagged behind in data efforts (Baldwin-Philippi, 2018). For each cycle, I searched for major-party candidates for president and notable digital/data staffers, along with search terms “digital,” “analytics,” or “data” or relevant digital communication platforms (ie. Facebook, Twitter, e-mail, CMS, etc.). Pieces were deemed relevant if they focused on the digital or data tactics campaigns employed and were in the first 10 pages of Google results. This resulted in a sample of 279 texts. Though many were short descriptions of a campaign practice or event, and more attention was given to longer more narrative pieces. These articles include everything from stalwarts of traditional journalism like the *New York Times* or *Washington Post*, to those with high circulation both online (*CNN*) and off (*USA Today*), industry-specific publications like *WIRED* or *Politico*, so-called “new” journalism outlets like *Vice*, and very limited readership blogs, and using Google search results meant these were most likely to be on the public radar. Moreover, anecdotally, many of the shorter pieces in this sample that did not rely on direct reporting did make reference to make of the more substantive reporting and longer profiles.

To analyze this body of public discussion of data campaigning, I relied on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), to investigate how power is “created and perpetuated through discourse within various political, social, and historical contexts” (Cramer, 2009, p. 220). In this analysis, I, focus not on what practices were discussed, but why and how they were argued to be productive toward campaign goals, which practices were deemed powerful, and who was constructed as competent or powerful. What resulted from initial coding were two broad categories: first of data itself as powerful, regardless of how the data was collected or parsed or campaign goals; second, those highlighted as doing the much-lauded data work are presented as outsiders to campaigns – whether coming from industry jobs, or simply different in attitude or demeanor. The following analysis breaks down these categories further. Following Fairclough (2010), this research seeks to denaturalize the idea that data campaigning is necessarily incredibly powerful, and elucidate the ways that narrative is constructed and also “make clear the social determinations and effects of [this] discourse” (p.31).

Findings: Data as Truth and Outsiders as Oracles

There are a variety of ways these public discussions of data campaigning take place. The vast majority of the content within the sample were news articles (258, or 92.5% of all pieces), rather than interviews (17, or 6%), or materials directly from political professionals or their firms (3, or 1%). A plurality (103 pieces) of that coverage comes from major news institutions

like national newspapers and news magazines and major news websites like *CNN* or *NBCnews*. Twenty-seven pieces come from popular online-first publications like *Slate*, *Huffington Post*, or *Vox*, and a similar amount—21—come from business reporting organizations like *Bloomberg* and *Business Insider*. Tech-focused publications like *WIRED* or *Mashable* published 36 of the articles on data campaigning, while politics-focused publications like *Politico* or *Campaigns & Elections* published 29.² Within those, coverage of data campaigning often falls into traditional genres of political news such as “game frame” style coverage of competing campaigns’ e-mail list size or number of Twitter followers, or process stories about who released a new app or hired staffers that week. Although those articles certainly contribute to an implicit view of data strategies as powerful because they are important enough to earn news coverage, more feature and profile writing and even op-eds tended to provide clearer discursive claims regarding the state and strength of that power. First, data itself – the numbers and infrastructure that holds data points – are presented as powerful and agentic. The language journalists and political consultants and staffers use to describe data is full of active-tense and agency, whereas language used to describe digital communication efforts describe new platforms passively, as things to be harnessed, rather than things that win elections. The size of data is also given particular attention, using sheer volume and vague or difficult to comprehend numbers as a stand-in for rigor. Second, the staffers and consultants doing the work of data campaigning are described as radical outsiders to traditional campaign staff. This is accompanied by an implicit argument that these outsiders are not governed by the politicking and sneaky wordsmithing that dominates traditional politics and are instead bound to positivism and truth.

Objectivity + Size = Power

In order to understand how data is talked about, studying how its descriptions differ from those concerning digital media production – the messages crafted for social media, e-mail, SMS, and so on – is helpful. One salient difference is that while discussions of digital practices often refrain from making claims about the effect of platforms, those concerning data and analytics are more likely to ascribe agency to the data points and models themselves. The language of various technologies “revolutionizing” campaigns happens across the board, but there are important differences in how digital and data operations are described, with data itself ascribed an active, agentic role, and one in which quantity, rather than quality, is repeatedly emphasized.

Repeatedly, digital media is discussed in a more nuanced way, as a tool or strategy that supplements, but does not cause action. Blue State Digital (now just Blue State), the technology firm that was started by Dean campaign alumni and became famous in the wake of Obama’s victory, describes the Obama 2008 campaign’s digital operation as one that “*managed* the rapidly growing movement’s organizing and fundraising arms” (Blue State Digital, 2009).³ A similar description from *Mother Jones* frames the 2004 Dean campaign itself – not the technology – as the active agent in the campaign’s advanced digital operation, saying it was the “force that enabled the internet to upend the entire [electioneering] industry,” and that they were “the first serious effort by Democrats to *harness* the web for political ends” (Murphy, 2012b). In a 2016 piece about viral content, the Washington Post focuses on the role played by rapid response teams on Twitter – the actual people tweeting and their coordinated labor – rather than the sheer size, algorithmic power, or other technical elements (Dewey, 2016).

Adam Nagourney (2008), the *New York Times* campaign correspondent, notes that the Obama 2008 campaign “sought to understand and harness the Internet (and other forms of so-called new media) to organize supporters and to reach voters.” In 2012, tools that were used to connect supporters and mobilize them were not described as creating victory, but they “made it simpler and easier for anyone to engage with the campaign” (Madrigal, 2013). On the other hand, data operations are often positioned as possessing agency. In 2012, it was data, not staffers, that “remade the process of targeting TV ads and created detailed models of swing state voters” according to *Time* magazine’s White House correspondent Scherer (2012b). Data itself is described as a “treasure map” in a Frontline deep dive into data campaigning (Miller, 2012), a “vote-garnering machine” (Pilkington & Michel, 2012a), an active force to be “unleashed” upon opponents (Pilkington & Michel, 2012b), and an “unforeseen force” by the *New York Times*’ Carr (2008). Even technology-oriented publications like *WIRED* made bold claims about the value of data itself, writing that “social media habits, browser history and mobile apps usage were goldmines” (Ackerman, 2012).

While some tech-savvy profiles are nuanced in their descriptions, those pieces are few and far between. Pieces by Sashsa Issenberg, who wrote *The Victory Lab*, a book about the rise of data campaigning, published by the MIT Technology review (2012b, 2012c), and limited reports questioning Trump’s data prowess and speaking against the dominant narrative of the campaign’s success in that area were published by *WIRED* (Lapowsky, 2016b) and *Washington Post* (Bump, 2016). That this skepticism was largely left to technology-focused publications is notable. Others were more subtle, implying rather than stating a direct connection, such as “the campaigns that did well with their big data efforts did well in the election” (Hellweg, 2012), or “whichever candidate uses Facebook effectively could win the war” (Pilkington & Michel, 2012a). While such claims leave room for plausible deniability, there is a clear implicit argument that data campaigning is the causal, not just a correlated, variable.

When coverage of data campaigning does venture into discussions of why this data itself is powerful, both journalists and staffers emphasize the size of a data campaign as an appropriate assessment of its efficacy – quite literally, that bigger is better. In 2011, in a video message to supporters, Obama campaign manager Jim Messina emphasized that they would be successful because they would “measure every single thing in this campaign” (Messina, 2011). He repeated this in interviews after the campaign as well, and this phrase and general sentiment was reported by journalists dozens of times over the course of the campaign and victory. Shortly thereafter, in February 2012, a Guardian article told the world about the data team’s unofficial motto: “Bigger, Better, 2012” (Pilkington & Michel, 2012a).

Repeatedly, coverage of data campaigning emphasizes the size of the data operation, with particular attention paid to the size of infrastructure (both human and machine) that supports data campaigning the number of people the campaign has data about, and the total amount of data collected. The numbers of staffers working on digital and data operations have often been compared in horserace-style coverage of campaign resources and infrastructure, as well as performance metrics like the amount of e-mail addresses or app downloads campaigns achieve. In 2016, articles compared Trump and Clinton’s overall data operations, with headlines like “Donald Trump’s Campaign Behind on Critical Data Operation” (Caldwell, 2016), and the minutia of specific data like social media followers (Gill, 2012) and app downloads (Lapowsky, 2016d). In 2012 the Romney and Obama campaigns were compared directly throughout the race, and the lag in organizational and human infrastructure was central to

Republicans' own narratives of their loss (Growth and Opportunity Project, 2013). Attention 305
to human infrastructure isn't just about comparing across parties, but across election cycles, as
much attention was given to how the Obama campaign grew from 2008 to 2012, often
described as "five times as large as that of the 2008 operation" (Scherer, 2012b).

Public discourse emphasizes the scale of data itself via attention to the total size of the 310
databases, the amount of people for whom campaigns have data, and the amount of data
points per person a campaign has cobbled together. In terms of the total people who
campaigns have data on, numbers from the single millions to hundreds of millions are
often written about with equal wonder. In 2008, *New York Times* columnist David Carr
emphasized the "Millions of names of supporters who can be engaged almost instantly" (Carr, 315
2008). By 2012, others were touting the Obama "integrated database on 110 million voters"
and "voter files of 190 million active voters" and "a list of email addresses ... that now stands at
23 million, as well as the contact information of Obama's 25 million Facebook fans"
(Pilkington & Michel, 2012a). In 2016, the RNC's lesser e-mail list was still touted as
substantive and important, growing from about 6 million to 10 million over the course of 320
the election (Gold, 2016; Green & Issenberg, 2016). The Trump campaign's largess was
highlighted via the scale of its ad buys, with the ballpark figure of \$70 million reported by
Bloomberg and re-circulated by over a dozen of outlets, among them *Quartz*, *Time*, *Fortune*,
Politico, and others. Moreover, there are numerous pieces of information about these millions
of individual people. According to a *Frontline* report following the Obama victory in 2012,
their voter file contained "up to 500 data points on every individual" (Green & Issenberg, 325
2016); according to *Mother Jones* the 2012 Obama campaign at one point gained "223 million
new pieces of info in the last two months" (Murphy, 2012a) versus *Forbes*' "the potentially
thousands of data points [campaigns] have collected about them" and "the details of up to
50 million cookies" (Pilkington & Michel, 2012a). In 2016, coverage of how Cambridge
Analytica targeted voters also emphasized the sheer scale of their database, with the 330
New York Times reporting that they had 3000–5000 data points on anyone who has opted
into their personality quizzes (Funk, 2016). This view of volume as power is not just held by
journalists but pitched to them by staffers as well. Writing for the MIT Technology Review
(2012), Sasha Issenberg quotes Obama data team's belief in large-scale data mining over
traditional polling: "You're making significant resource decisions based on 160 people?" asks 335
Mitch Stewart of Organizing for America [...] 'Isn't that nuts?'"

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Attention to the amount of testing, rather than the substantive findings tests reveal or 340
return on investment they yield is also common. The Obama campaign's well-publicized
claim that they "ran [models of] the election 66,000 times a night" (*Inside the Cave*,
2013) was argued to be key to their success, and this was echoed in
coverage of Clinton's data team, which ran "400,000 simulations a day of what the race
against Trump might look like" (Wagner, 2016). The Trump campaign's own battery of
tests were highlighted in Issenberg and Green's blockbuster *Bloomberg* feature published
in the week before the election, and reiterated across TV and online news. In these articles,
the numbers of ad tests done differed somewhat, with *WIRED* reporting the campaign was 345
testing "as many as 50,000 Facebook ads a day," (Lapowsky, 2017), *60 Minutes* claiming
a similar "average, 50,000–60,000 a day" ("60 Minutes," 2018), the *Bloomberg* piece
describing "100,000 distinct pieces of creative content" (Green & Issenberg, 2016) that
could be tested against each other, and a story in tech-focused *CNET* claiming there were
"up to 150,000 pieces of content [being tested] on a peak day" (Collins, 2017). 350

Of course, data is important to contemporary campaigns, but an equivalence between data and truth, or an equivalence between more data and more truth is a faulty way to describe data's very real importance to campaigns. As Hersh's (2015) work shows, the most important data for getting out the vote are a relatively small number of publicly available data points, not the hundreds of lifestyle points campaigns boast of. This does not mean minute data points are always unhelpful – knowing what browser and device a reader is using can allow campaigns to present advertisements and layouts that look better and are more likely to be clicked on – they are not, however, more likely to improve persuasive targeting capacity, no matter if there are 500 or 1000 of them. Yet, the assumption that more is better is often repeated by political professionals and journalists alike. As a 2012 *Frontline* special on the Obama campaign's use of data claimed, "The more information fed into these models, the better a campaign can predict what issues particular voters might care about, or what type of ads they would be most receptive to" (Miller, 2012). An important element of these narratives is the lack of details about exactly what data is used or how it is used, opting instead for vague statements from campaigns that hinge on the unimpeachability of data itself, such this description of why the Trump campaign's ads aimed at demobilizing turnout among Black voters would work: simply, "we know because we've modelled this" (Green & Issenberg, 2016). This echoes research finding that much of the public facing documentation promoted by digital strategy groups makes scientific sounding claims, but lacks empirical validity, or at best, lacks explanation of it (Simon, 2019). By arguing that the size of data should be equated with its power, and assuming that data itself has power without discussion of how, when, or why these practices work, this coverage manages to combine the often-criticized hypodermic needle model of communication wherein messages naturally and necessarily result in effects with a technologically determinist model of a new technology as necessarily powerful.

Geeks, Hipsters, and Nerds: Outsiders in the Campaign

Coverage of campaigns' digital efforts has focused on the role played by outsiders – those who deviate from the culture of campaigns, as well as those who deviate from societal norms more broadly. From 2004–2016, there have been readily available mainstream political archetypes for those doing data work in campaigns: the Bain consultants who dominated Romney's staff in 2012, whose professional experience made them skeptical of what they saw as Cambridge Analytica's outsized claims (Greene, 2018), the Republican party's longer history of using consumer marketing firms and consultants more familiar with data, the DNC's 2006 data plan led by business leaders George Soros and Harold Ickes (Edsall, 2006). And yet, it is the image of the geek, the hipster, the programmer-nerd who stands outside campaign culture that is the emblem of the data-driven campaign. Centering these figures constructs data campaigning as a particular combination of mysticism and positivism. In particular, this has meant highlighting the role and efforts played by two overarching groups, one with roots in geek and hacker culture (hackers, geeks, hipsters) and one with roots in science and math (nerds, quants, data crunchers, scientists). The differences between these outsiders and traditional campaign staffers have been constructed both textually and visually, using a combination of staged photographs, graphic design elements, and photojournalism in news coverage.

Importantly, before 2012, there were very few actual outsiders working in campaigns – even on the digital side.⁴ In the lead-up to 2012, the Obama campaign went to great lengths to invite

new data-oriented people who had only worked in commercial industry before (Kreiss & Jasinski, 2016). The 2012 Romney campaign, like the 2008 Obama campaign before them and to a large degree the Trump 2016 campaign after, doled this work out to contractors who were not actual campaign staffers. While the Trump 2016 campaign welcomed newcomers in the form of “embeds” from tech firms who would work in their offices (Kreiss & McGregor, 2017), they also limited the number of actual staffers coming from private industry. In a *Forbes* profile of Jared Kushner, he lauded these outsiders, saying “our best people were mostly the ones who volunteered pro bono [...] people from the business world” (Bertoni, 2016). Clinton’s 2016 campaign was staffed by “a team of Silicon Valley stars” (Lapowsky, 2016a).

Sasha Issenberg’s (2012a) *Victory Lab* pits traditional and new data staffers against one another explicitly, titling a chapter “Geeks > Gurus.” While it highlights consumer marketing-oriented consultants as being surprised that “you don’t do this in politics,” his story also centers the geeks, not the consulting professionals, as the catalyst for new campaign practices. Following the 2012 election, which *WIRED* referred to as the “nerdiest election ever” and an “onslaught of geekdom, wonkery, and nerdgasms” (Ackerman, 2012), tech journalist Alexis Madrigal penned an in-depth profile for *The Atlantic* titled “When the Nerds Go Marching in” (Madrigal, 2013). The piece is rooted in references to geek culture paragons like Dungeons and Dragons and LARPing, despite the fact that nowhere in the campaign are people described as actually engaging in these behaviors. Instead, Madrigal uses them as metaphors, signaling the type of people working in the data campaign and flagging their strangeness. The language of geeks and nerds echoes throughout headlines and a wide array of articles, and staffers who are outsiders – from “a self-described futurist” (Murphy, 2012a) to “wizards” (Pilkington, 2012) – are often held up by journalists as key to a data campaign’s success.

Descriptions of Obama’s 2012 CTO, Harper Reed, highlighted his role as a hacker and a geek, and often play up his more unconventional style in photographs as well. Photographs highlight his unkempt hair, handlebar mustache, and often show him with exaggerated quizzical looks. Madrigal’s (2013) profile the campaigns’ data efforts focuses on Reed, with much space devoted to describing his time spent as an outsider youth “Marilyn Mansoning,” his love of t-shirts, and the fact that “he may be like you, but he also juggles better than you, and is wilder than you, more fun than you, cooler than you.” Photographs of Reed in *Mother Jones*, *The Atlantic*, *Huffington Post*, *Business Insider*, and *TechCrunch* emphasize these outsider qualities as well, while also emphasizing the ways other data staffers are different. One *Mother Jones* article (Murphy, 2012b) leads with a photograph of Reed with a finger in the air as if to say “aha!” and a cell phone to his ear, surrounded by design elements of swirling code, while another (Murphy, 2012a) uses a photograph of him giving a speech on a stage, where he is wearing a hoodie and bright t-shirt, with his usual bouffant hairstyle and thick-rimmed glasses and styled handlebar mustache. A similar photograph of Reed featured in a major piece by *The Atlantic* (Madrigal, 2013) features him in profile, with focus on his mustache, glasses, and hair, as well as his gauged ears with many earrings. This is not merely the work of journalists framing Reed in a particular way, but very much in line with the image Reed himself projects via his personal website and social media accounts. Across the board, depictions by journalists are intertwined with political practitioners’ strategic attempts to frame their work and themselves.

Many of these images are photojournalistic depictions of real, behind the scenes happenings, such as a major Time Magazine by Daniel Shea (featured in Scherer, 2012a) photo of the

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Obama campaign's "cave," a darkroom with green lights refracting off of the tables and ceiling, staffers faces lit by their computer screens and the detritus of many a campaign office – coffee cups, soda cans, and stacks of paper – strewn all over. This photograph was also used by *Business Insider* and *Pacific Standard*. The cave is often described in detail when not photographed, with the Times describing it as a "windowless separate office ... to lose all sense of time and focus" and a secretive place, affixed with signs created by data staffers themselves with phrases like "Those people are weird, don't go in there," "That's the secret sauce," or "politics as done by Martians" (Rutenberg, 2013). A *Washington Post* academic op-ed (Kreis, 2015) about the data advantage held by Democrats did not refer to the cave at all, yet it prominently featured a photograph by Joe Kowsky of a darkened room, lit only by a computer screen with a screensaver that reads "Yes We Code." Although these descriptions and photographs are documenting events that happened (often routinely), they are more than just a representation of reality; they are also depictions that emphasize the separateness of data staffers. Not all digital staffers are portrayed this way. Joe Rospars (Obama 2008 and 2012), Teddy Goff (Obama 2008 and 2012, Clinton 2016) and Zac Moffatt (Romney 2012), for instance, are presented as traditional campaign staffers in appearance and disposition – but in such cases, less attention overall is paid to personality or affect, amplifying the outsider frame when used.

Data staffers were also portrayed as outsiders for their more scientific backgrounds and approaches. Alexander Nix, CEO of Cambridge Analytica during their work with the Trump campaign, repeatedly referred to himself and others doing so-called psychographic targeting as "math men" (Rosenberg, Confessore, & Cadwalladr, 2019). An image of Nix giving a speech on a stage in front of a huge graphic of dashboards full of charts and graphs was published by *Vox*, *NPR*, *Buzzfeed*, *The Guardian*, *Washington Post*, *NBCNews*, *Slate*, and the *New York Times*, among others. In 2012, the group of data folks working on the campaign was simply called "the scientists" (Issenberg, 2012c). That same cycle, the Obama campaign hired Rayid Ghani to head up data efforts and given the title of "Chief Scientist." While Ghani is often referred to in news stories as Chief Data Scientist – a more common term in the field – the campaign's official title foregoes convention to privilege science itself over the particulars of "data science." Although he has been featured less prominently and few images of him ran in news coverage, one of three images consisted of him in front of a data-visualization about the City of Chicago. A 2012 *Mother Jones* profile of eight of "Obama's Digital Gurus" emphasized the fact that Ghani was a "political novice," and highlighted fellow data staffer Michael D'Agostino's career as an "astrophysicist at Argonne National Laboratory and in Antarctica" (Murphy, 2012b). This profile in particular was roundly criticized for featuring no women, despite the fact that Amelia Showalter, director of digital analytics, was the boss of at least two men featured. When four other women were subsequently added in a subsequent correction and addition to the piece. None of them was referred to as scientists, or with any of the trappings of geek or nerd culture. The work of data campaigning was also discussed by journalists in scientific terms, describing the team as the "department of experiments" (Issenberg, 2014) and repeatedly referring campaigns' GOTV testing as "drug testing for democracy" and "the kind used in clinical trials for medical drugs" (Issenberg, 2014; Tufekci, 2012, respectively). A 2016 profile of Clinton's director of analytics, Elan Kriegel, opens with an account of his windows strewn with "erasable marker scribbblings reminiscent of *A Beautiful Mind*" (Goldmacher, 2016), emphasizing his status as an outsider math genius,

rather than someone who had worked in Democratic politics since 2010, including on the 2012 Obama campaign, and starting his own data consulting firm, Blue Labs.

Although there are salient differences between how geeks and nerds are described, they both share in their role of outsider. The fact of their difference, as opposed to tradition campaign “hacks,” is central in each case, and the two types of staffers are often juxtaposed. Madrigal’s (2013) debrief of the 2012 Obama tech operation simultaneously described the team as professional – a “silicon valley dream team” of “elite” tech talent – and as outsiders who don’t gel with the managed culture of campaigns. Traditional staffers, instead, “wear khakis. They only own long-sleeve dress shirts. Their old photos on Facebook show them canvassing for local politicians and winning cross-country meets.” Data staffers, in contrast, might be described as “playing ping pong in flip flops against Obama” (Rutenberg, 2013). The juxtaposition is sometimes visually constructed as well, as in a photograph of Obama CTO Michael Slaby and Google CEO Eric Schmidt in button-down shirts, seated near, but also apart from those who are obviously on the data team: five men in hoodies, often heavily bearded (Madrigal, 2013).

Difference itself, even the kind outside of geekdom and science was central to coverage of the 2016 Trump data operation. Brad Parscale, Trump’s 2016 Digital Director, is often described as an outsider to both Washington and the Silicon Valley Elite. In an early profile in *WIRED*, journalist Issie Lapowsky describes Parscale as “a political novice who has built a professional reputation for himself in Texas, but has never worked in Washington” and quotes another strategist calling him “a non-traditional guy, and he’s good for a non-traditional campaign” (Lapowsky, 2016c). The geographical choice to keep the tech team centered in San Antonio, is emphasized in coverage, signaling the differentness and outsider status of the team. Just as Reed’s appearance was an indicator of his outsider status in 2012, so too is Parscale’s. Issenberg (2016) describes him as looking “like a mixed martial arts fighter” – not the look of a geek, but also certainly not the khakis of the consulting class. Moreover, Parscale does not just look different; Green and Issenberg’s profile, the first introduction most people had to Parscale, emphasizes that he often brushes off traditional metrics of campaign success, such as e-mail spam-ratings and open rates. A self-described “farm boy from Kansas,” (Lapowsky, 2016c), Parscale’s story of how his small company began working for the president at a bargain basement price sets the narrative arc for the scrappy, upstart, outsider tech effort offered by the Trump campaign (and the larger campaign as a whole). Ultimately, these depictions of difference give data teams the role of valorized outsiders who are decidedly unlike political staffers. Instead of being smooth talkers and persuaders, they are scientists who pursue truth and find correct answers. While everyone in the campaign is working toward a clear political goal, the job of the data staffers is not to be a political actor, but an objective problem solver. These views are not limited to journalists. As Karpf (2016) has written, advocacy groups and campaigns often view the data gained by message testing to be a neutral and objective arbiter in disputes.

Conclusion and Discussion

In journalistic coverage of data campaigning, data itself is a powerful and nearly unstoppable force. Headlines like “The Data that Turned the World Upside Down” (Grassegger & Krogerus, 2017) abound, while the particular practices of how to parse data, specific variables, or even how specific campaign goals require different forms of data, are seldom

discussed. Instead, data itself – the terabytes and the number of data points collected, rather than the human choices behind what issues to focus on and which messages to test across populations – are presented as powerful. As this paper details, those claims also locate data’s power in its size. Together, the scale and absolute power of data are presented as necessarily revealing objective, correct strategies about how to campaign. On the whole, these narratives fall into the oft-critiqued hypodermic needle model of media effects, assuming that the messages and tactics data-campaigning produces have strong effects without much attention to the nuance of when or how they work, often in face of mixed or non-existent evidence. The way the narratives emphasize the agency of the data itself speaks to this assumption particularly. Not only is this hypodermic needle model an oversimplification of the role of data but such simplification steers the conversation away from the important discussion about the content of messages. As we now know that at least some percentage of the social media ads hailed as successful in 2016 explicitly drew on sentiments that were designed to tap into existing racial divides and racist and xenophobic sentiment, conversations about the fact that those topics drive voters, rather than the efficacy of any or all targeting practices, are important and risk being crowded out by a technologically determinist view of which messages in which platforms made persuasion occurs.

Discussion of data’s power and objectivity as well as parallel narratives of data staffers as outsiders who are different from traditional campaign staff contribute to the practices and practitioners of data campaigning framing as almost apolitical. As this article details, narratives about data staffers as outsiders present two related but divergent populations of geeks and scientists as the people within the campaign who win elections. Both groups are presented as uniquely able to determine the true signals of the public and the correct course of action due to their trust in data and computing and reliance on objective empirical data. Data professionals are figuring out the “correct” answer to a math problem, rather than making ethics-infused choices about which narrative to use to persuade people about real social issues. Although all of these articles concern political events, from elections themselves to individual messages, the political content of these moments – the narratives or images for each ad, the overall message of the campaigns, the tough ethical choices about which ads to run or which audiences to speak to – are not the pivotal moments in news stories about data campaigning. Instead conversations about conversion rates, the efficiency of targeting practices, and the scale of databases abound. Implicit in this narrative is a complimentary vision of campaign staffers and consultants as not only driven by an unreliable gut but subject to changing their political tactics and messages based on what seems expedient at the time. This aligns with the American public’s more general and long-standing distaste for “politics” – which relies upon and furthers partisan divides to serve politicians’ self-interest rather than those of the people (Dionne, 2004), and acts as an institutional barrier to true self-governance and popular participation (Morone, 1998). As Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (1995, 2002) work on how the public thinks of governing institutions has shown, what people want is a “stealth government” of efficiency and productive solutions, not the messy deliberative work – the committees and purposefully slow processes, the public debating and disagreeing – that is key to governance. Of course, these desires are incompatible, but the yearning for efficiency and apolitical politics is echoed in the excitement about moving power within the campaign from the persuaders and hacks to the scientists making objective data-campaigning

practices. This emphasis on data's concreteness and empiricism echoes earlier research on "new" empirical tactics, such as Herbst's (1995) work detailing the rise of polling and its implications for political life, wherein she argues that rise of polling, and its centrality to how we understand contemporary politics is due to a more general embrace of instrumental rationality, and it has also reinforced this norm. Although the timeline for the tactics studied here is much shorter, the reverence for an instrumental rationality persists. 580

This narrative also has implications for which firms are likely to get contracts for ongoing advocacy or off-cycle elections and is of clear economic benefit to professionals doing the work of data campaigning. Not only are data staffers presented as effective, but as new and different and unlike existing firms or consultants, with skills you can't get from traditional consultants. Moreover, narratives of data staffers as outsiders help campaigns as a whole maintain control over their image in times of organizational turmoil. Because the growing pains and inter-team conflicts campaigns are universally covered, situating data staffers as outsiders allows campaigns to help explain this strife as inevitable, unsurprising, and ultimately in the service of success, rather than detrimental to it. As staffers have increasingly looked to start their own consulting firms following recent election cycles (Kreiss & Jasinski, 2016), the economic machinery of the campaigning cottage industry deserves more attention. As such, this paper points to future avenues of research in campaigns, involving investigation into how these narratives about power translate into more tangible forms of power such as who wins awards or earns high-status positions in future campaigns, who starts digital consulting firms, which firms succeed and how they position themselves in the data market, and how much money they bring in. 585 590 595

Additional attention to how outsider narratives depict a particularly masculine vision for who will revolutionize campaigns is warranted. As many scholars of geek and hacker culture have written about extensively, geek culture has long been a space in which masculinity is centered (Kendall, 2011), to the extent that it often reaches toxic proportions (Massanari, 2017). As a professional field that has lacked women in top positions and is known for creating particular barriers for women in general (Kreiss & Adams, 2019), political tech's status as male-dominated is reified by journalistic coverage of data campaigning. Even if women are being hired for more digital and data roles in the field (Korecki & King, 2019), women's positions as authorities, change-makers, and powerful people within the field will be diminished if archetypes for such roles are continuously depicted as masculine. This is especially true in the campaign environment where, as Kreiss and Adams (2019) have pointed out, hiring happens fast, and choices often default to who people know interpersonally, or by reputation. 600 605 610

Q10 These descriptions of data campaigning as powerful echo findings surrounding how data in general is presented as all-powerful (Beer, 2019; Boyd & Crawford, 2012), as well as how digital technology more broadly is often mythologized in similar ways (Halpern, 2015; Mosco, 2005). This framing of data's power resting in its size is not entirely new, but that this happens in political campaigns, and that this definition of power stands in for deeper discussions and descriptions of the content of political messaging makes its use in political campaigns especially important. As such, this paper points to future research avenues in journalism studies, including more deductive analyses of the types of stories written about digital campaigning or qualitative research concerning why journalists make the framing and narrative choices they do. 615 620

The construction of data campaigning as a productive strategy is necessarily part of an attempt to give it power within the world of political campaigning. This work stands as an initial

investigation into how the practices of data-driven campaigning have been constructed as powerful by journalists who cover them, and in doing so, uncovers narratives about the objectivity of data, and the outsiders that work their magic for campaigns. In bringing these narratives to light and denaturalizing them, this work helps reveal how they contribute to framing this “new” campaign strategy as fundamentally about figuring out objective answers to solvable problems and contribute to political professionals’ maintenance of organizational power. 625

Notes 630

1. For a fuller overview of how data campaigning practices have been adopted and affected campaigns over time, see Nickerson and Rogers (2014). For an overview of what we know and don’t know about data campaigning’s empirical effects, see Baldwin-Philippi (2020).
2. Other genres of news were present in much less significant numbers, such as six pieces by local news outlets, five by lifestyle magazines like *Esquire*, *Rolling Stone*, or *Cosmopolitan*, and other obscure publications. 635
3. Emphasis in all quotes is added.
4. Of exceptions to this – Dan Siroker took leave from Google to work on the Obama 2008 campaign, and Chris Hughes was a relative newcomer to politics when he started with the Obama campaign. But these were, at their core, still exceptions. 640

Disclosure statement

Q11 No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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