Between Anarchy and Order: Digital campaigning heuristics in hybrid media environments

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The digitalization of the mediated public sphere challenges formerly established norms and routines of democratic competition. Reaching multiple audiences via multiple social media platforms has become an integral part of election campaigns. Yet, the dynamics of decentralization and disruption that mark contemporary hybrid media environments – such as the proliferation of platforms, disinformation, opaque algorithms, novel analytics, and audience fragmentation – also make the standardization of new digital campaigning strategies and norms of institutionally appropriate communication elusive for political campaign practitioners (e.g., Bennett & Pfetsch 2018; Chadwick 2013; Karpf 2016). This raises a number of critical questions about how these actors are making sense of such a complex and volatile media landscape during elections. For instance, how do campaign communication professionals devise and evaluate their digital electioneering strategies? How do they map the interconnected relationships between audiences, genres of communication, media platforms, and the field of political party competitors? And what can these assessments tell us about how campaign practitioners think digital electioneering should be done? Finally, what implications and potential consequences do these (new) ways of orientation have for democratic discourses in competitive public spheres?

To begin addressing these questions, we advance an approach from theorizing and research on cognitive "heuristics." Variously conceptualized as informational shortcuts, rules of thumb, institutional schemas, or logics, scholars have consistently shown that people rely on simple heuristic judgments for decision-making, especially when the conditions for such decisions are insecure and their results difficult to assess ex ante (e.g., DiMaggio 1997; Gigerenzer and Gaissmaier 2011; Kahneman 2011). Applied to the current era of political communication, we define digital heuristics as simple rule-governed judgements based on more or less explicit assumptions about the structuring of different platforms, including the role of underlying algorithms, the nature of their audiences, and styles or genres of communication that they privilege, that guide the digital campaigning strategies of campaign practitioners. Conceptualizing and identifying the specific digital heuristics employed by campaign communication professionals can provide unique analytic leverage for understanding the thinking underlying evolving digital campaigning strategies across platforms, political parties, and national contexts (c.f., Schäfer 2021). Thus, according to our approach, structural conditions of current communication environments (such as social media affordances) indirectly - rather than directly - influence political actors' communicative behavior and output through their heuristic perceptions.

Based on these assumptions, we empirically investigate political campaign practitioner accounts from Germany and the United Kingdom. More specifically, analyzing interviews with twelve communication managers from major German and British political parties about their work on general election campaigns in 2017, we identify typical heuristic judgements that are based on the hybrid and algorithmic characteristics of current communication environments. In addition to detailing these heuristics, we discuss the normative assumptions that they reveal about how different political campaigns think political institutions like media and political parties should work and what "good" political communication should look like.

The paper concludes by considering the political and normative implications of the results. Although we do not evaluate how campaigns actually behave but rather how campaign practitioners think about their communication behaviors, the results have several implications for the performance of electoral politics and the quality of the democratic discourse. For example, if party com-

munication managers think that using polarizing language is a necessary prerequisite for successful political communication on social media platforms, then this might result in respective performances and foster populist communication styles within social media that could also travel to other more traditional channels within the hybrid media system. Our findings also contribute to recent scholarship on how campaigns are using social media to achieve their electoral ambitions by looking beyond the U.S. case and beyond "data-driven campaigning" (e.g., Anstead 2017; Baldwin-Phillipi 2019; Kreiss et al. 2018).

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