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Studying Digital Parties: Methods, Challenges and Responses

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The study of political parties has a long and industrious history. Around the globe, academics have mapped party organisation and structures (see for example Katz and Mair 1995; Scarrow 2015), offered insights into parties' strategic thinking and rationale (see for example Lipset and Rokkan 1967; Meguid 2008), and traced electoral successes and failures. These insights have been gathered using interviews, ethnographies, survey analysis and scrutiny of official records (Faucher 2005; Katz and Mair 1992; Scarrow, Webb and Poguntke 2017). Such methods have served scholars of party politics well, but as parties have embraced digital technology, questions have emerged about how best to study digital parties.

In this chapter, we engage with the question of method, asking how can digital parties be studied, and what barriers do researchers need to overcome? These questions are particularly important because it is not always obvious how a study of digital practices should proceed. Whilst many established methods can be deployed to study practices online, there are some aspects of digital parties that appear to require different methodological approaches. In addressing this situation, we discuss the methods available for conducting research in line with Fitzpatrick's '5-Pillar-Model', thinking about the type of analysis that scholars may wish to pursue. We then outline existing studies that adopt different methods, offering illustrations of how this analysis can be done. Following this, we turn to discuss the challenges that scholars of digital parties confront and consider how these may be overcome. Throughout this discussion we therefore outline possible avenues for analysis and consider the varied competencies that scholars of digital parties may need. These insights will be valuable to scholars studying the emergence of new, inherently digital parties, and those who study more established parties who are (to varying degrees) adapting to the rise of digital technology.

How have parties traditionally been studied?

The study of party politics is one of the most enduring in contemporary political science. It is a topic that has been studied in many different ways, but which is nevertheless tied to a relatively consistent toolkit of methods. In introducing these methods, it is illustrative to look at the contents of the very first issue of *Party Politics* published in 1995. This journal - the first to focus exclusively on political parties - has been host to leading scholarship on this topic. Within the first issue many of the methods and approaches that have become common are found. They include a (re)visitation of May's Law of Curvilinear Disparity (1973) based on surveys of politicians, local constituency officers, party members and voters at the 1992 United Kingdom General Election (Norris 1995); an expert survey to better understand how political parties operationalise and understand the terms 'left' and 'right' (Huber and Inglehart, 1995); and the introduction of a new dataset/approach to better understand party organisation (Appleton and Ward 1995). Whilst a range of methods have been adopted beyond this (such as content and discourse analyses), for the sake of brevity we have identified four approaches - the survey, analysis of party records, interviews and ethnographies - that are commonly found.

Survey analysis remains one of the most prevalent forms of (party) political study. For example, those interested in political party membership and in ascertaining exactly who joins a party, why they do it, and what kind of benefits they provide, often do their research via surveys of members themselves (see for example Seyd and Whiteley 1992; Cross and Young 2008; Poletti et al. 2018). Many other surveys are long-running and gather data on public opinion at the local or national level, with examples including the British Election Study (see Johnston et al. 2007; Campbell and Childs 2015; Green 2015; Evans and Mellon 2019) and the American National Election Survey (see Beck and Heidemann 2014; Dinas 2014;

Jacobson 2019). Others gather data on the international level, with studies such as Eurobarometer and the World Values Survey, or the Members and Activists of Political Parties (MAPP) project survey, asking common questions in multiple jurisdictions.¹ Longitudinal studies of these kinds are of particular value in allowing scholars to study trends over time, offering valuable insight into, for example, levels of citizen trust in parties (Keele 2005). Another form of survey, that of experts, is also often used to offer additional insights, with scholars studying, for example, electoral integrity (as seen in the Pippa Norris helmed Electoral Integrity Project) and partisan effects of Brexit in Europe (Taggart and Sczcerbiak 2018). Expert surveys offer a quick and easy means to identify and measure partisan preferences and perceptions - and carry with them the authoritative weight of the expert - yet they are not without their detractors (see for example Budge 2000).

Political parties have also been studied by collating data from various party records. Most recently this was undertaken by Scarrow, Webb and Poguntke (2017) as a part of their Political Party Database (PPDB) project. This research took inspiration from Katz and Mair's pioneering handbook (1992), and gathered data on 122 political parties in nineteen democracies using a team of country level experts (Scarrow and Webb 2017). Other scholars have sought to extend this database to produce an 'online database of political parties worldwide' titled 'Party Facts' (Döring and Regel 2019). The use of official party records can also be more localised and micro-scale. For example, we (Dommett and Power 2019) have previously used official party spending returns submitted to the UK Electoral Commission to study digital campaign spend on Facebook. Other work has also used 'grey literature' (i.e. documents of historical record) to understand how and why certain decisions are made (Robinson 2012; Watts 2018; see also Theis 2002).

In addition to often quantitative and comparative analyses of parties, a wealth of studies utilise, or 'rediscover' (see Vromen 2017) qualitative methods. The toolkit of methods deployed here is wide, but they have highlighted intricacies in partisan politics that the (necessarily) broader quantitative work might miss (see for example Evans 1979; Lovenduski 2005; Evans and Kenny, 2018). Elite interviews have therefore been used to understand democratic partisan processes (Vromen and Gauja 2009); decisions made around political party financing (Power 2017; 2020); the effect of membership surges on party organisation (Garland 2017); and changes in migration policy (Consterdine 2018). Furthermore, ethnographies have thrown light onto other party-political processes such as party conferences (Faucher-King 2005), or political campaigning (Nielsen 2012).

As well as being deployed in isolation, these methods are also often combined. This 'mixed-methods' approach allows scholars to combine breadth and depth, offering nuanced insight into the way that parties work. Recent examples include McMenamin's (2013) detailed investigation into why businesses contribute to political parties, Ford and Goodwin's (2014) work outlining the drivers of United Kingdom Independence Party support, and Annesley, Beckwith and Franceschet's (2019) cross-national study of the gendered processes behind cabinet formation.

Looking back over the history of the study of parties, then, it is possible to identify a range of different methods that have offered insights into the way parties work. And yet, as scholars begin to study the emergence of new, inherently digital parties, and explore how established parties are adapting to digital, it is no clear how suitable these methods are, or whether alternative approaches are required.

¹ These surveys often do not focus exclusively on parties, but they contain many questions that scholars of party politics use.

Methods for studying digital parties

For scholars interested in digital parties, many of the methodologies and approaches outlined above are applicable when looking to study practices online. Indeed, scholars have already shown how surveys (Gibson et al. 2017; Kasper and Kosiara-Pedersen 2014; Lusoli and Ward 2004), documentary analysis (Bimber 2014), interviews (Dommett et al., 2020; Kreiss et al. 2018; Penney 2018), content analyses (Gibson 2015; Van Selm et al. 2008) or a mix of these methods (Jungherr 2016; Karlsen 2009) can be used to offer insight into parties' digital practices. However, whilst many established methods can be employed to study practices online, it is important to recognise that these are not the only available tools. In particular, recent studies have shown scholars to be using computational methods such as data-scraping and big data analysis to offer new forms of insight into parties' behaviour online. It has therefore become common for scholars to query the Application Programming Interface (API) of social media companies to gather data on Twitter usage (Ceron and d'Adda 2016; Ramos-Serrano et al. 2018). And scholars such as Larsson (2016) have used automated data collection services to gather data on platforms such as Facebook. These examples show that new data collection techniques and methods are being deployed to study different aspects of digital parties. At present, however, there have been few attempts to outline and classify what is being done and which approaches are available for scholars interested in studying this realm.

In seeking to address this gap, we argue that it is useful to think about the kind of insights that a scholar of digital parties may be interested in generating when studying each of Fitzpatrick's 5 pillars. We do not, therefore, provide a list of available online and offline methods and consider the merits of each. Instead, we consider the types of insight that scholars may seek to generate, and discuss examples that showcase how offline and online methods can be used to do so. This approach allows us to consider the very different methods and approaches that can be used to gather data, introducing readers to a range of alternatives and showing how these can be applied.

What to study in digital parties?

The study of digital parties is, as indicated above, not uniform - a range of different questions and objects of study can be of interest. As Fitzpatrick has shown, scholars may wish to study party membership, leaders, policies, public image and/or resources. Given these varied possible interests (and others besides), we argue that it is useful to think about the different kinds of research activity that scholars of digital parties may wish to carry out. With reference to leading studies in this area, we use the discussion below to show how different methods and techniques can be employed, providing an overview of what is possible.

In specifying the types of study that scholars of digital parties may wish to pursue, we identify an interest in:

1. Classification
2. Intention
3. Practice
4. Implication

These are applicable to each part of the '5-Pillar-Model' outlined in Fitzpatrick's earlier chapter.

Classification

The first activity scholars of digital parties may want to pursue is what we term classification. This term is used to describe an interest in identifying and categorising the way in which digital

characterises party activities. Such analysis is important because existing scholarship has shown that digital can inform parties' activities in different ways. As Gerbaudo (2019, p.4) has discussed, whilst many parties such as the Pirate Parties, Podemos, Insoumise and Labour have embraced digital technology and promised to 'deliver a new politics supported by digital technology' (p.4), others have not approached digital in this way. It is therefore possible to find examples of parties that have adopted only a few digital tools, or who use digital to exercise control (rather than to promote participation) (Chadwick and Stromer-Galley 2016). Such variations suggest that it is important to map the way in which digital is being used by parties, classifying differences in each pillar of the '5-Pillar-Model' to improve our understanding of what is happening and how parties differ from one another.

A number of existing studies have emerged that have sought to classify parties' digital characteristics. At the international level, Norris (2001) sought to map the extent to which parties were online, using aggregate data and content analysis of 339 party websites in 179 nations worldwide to provide comparative analysis. At a more localised level, Casero-Ripollés, Feenstra, and Tormey (2016) undertook a study of Podemos that sought to determine the extent to which old and new media were being used by the party. Their approach saw the adoption of qualitative documentary analysis, wherein eight sources (including website text and political speeches) were used to classify party practices. Also focusing on European parties in Spain, and specifically the legacy of the 15M movement - and the extent to which political parties had been reinvented in the digital age - Tormey and Feenstra (2015), used a mixed method approach, combining analysis of in-depth interviews with content analysis of journalistic materials, websites, Facebook pages and Twitter accounts. Elsewhere, scholars have focused on specific aspects of party activity and their relationship to digital with Kefford (2019), for example, using interview data to argue that two Australian parties can be classified as exhibiting 'stratarchical' adoption of digital campaigning tools.

What appears from these examples, is that scholars engaged in classification are currently using established techniques, but are analysing data collected offline and online. Content analysis of party websites and interviews have therefore been pivotal techniques by which academics have aimed to classify and analyse trends online. This demonstrates that far from requiring entirely novel techniques, established methods can be employed to study developments online. Nevertheless, it is apparent that existing classificatory work is at present undeveloped. Whilst texts such as Gerbaudo's *Digital Party* (2019; see also 2020) trace party practices, there is as yet no comprehensive framework by which to classify and compare parties' digital adoption practices - showing the need for more studies of this type.

Intention

In addition to classifying practice, scholars can also be interested in studying intentions in digital parties in regards to each of the 5 pillars. By intentions, we mean the objectives, aims and stated ideals of political actors within parties. Whilst attention has often been focused on the motivations of party elites and representatives (reflecting their power within party structures), intentions can also be observed amongst grassroots activists. A study of this type allows scholars to gather data on perceptions of digital affordances and plans or aspirations for digital adoption. Such insights can be used to explore the degree to which these objectives are shared throughout party hierarchies and across different party organisations. They also allow for researcher's to 'shift the focus away from institutions and organizations and towards the analysis of impulses, emotions, identities and beliefs' providing a more holistic understanding of (digital) party activity (Chadwick, 2020, p.2).

Intentions have often been the focus of scholarly analysis, and it is common to see interviews and documentary analysis of official and unofficial, or public and private sources used to gain

insights. These approaches are often distinguished by their focus on what Schmidt terms communicative and coordinative discourse - whereby communicative refers to discourse between 'political actors and the public engaged in presenting, contesting, deliberating, and legitimating those policy ideas', and coordinative captures discourse 'among policy actors engaged in creating, deliberating, arguing, bargaining, and reaching agreement on policies' (2011, p.115). Scholars can therefore explore how intentions are expressed to different audiences, and use this approach to gain insight into what actors are prepared to say in different contexts.

Intentions for digital in the party realm have primarily been studied using qualitative techniques. Lusoli and Ward (2004), for example, used a survey of party activists in the UK to explore activists' perception and use of new media, and to generate data on the Internet's potential for members' participation and engagement. Elsewhere, Dommett (2018) conducted interviews with party elites to determine the motivations behind digital adoption with regards to activist participation. Others have adopted more theoretical approaches. For example, Cardenal (2013) draws on rational choice theory to explain why parties are not exploiting digital tools for political mobilisation. Highlighting the uncertain benefits and high costs that inform decision making, and the relevance of party characteristics for party behaviour, the study diagnoses why certain types of party display the digital adoption practices they do.

These studies often require qualitative techniques in order to identify and explore the thinking behind parties' digital behaviour. They can be challenging to execute because of issues of access - especially (as discussed further below) where digital actors are scarce and often difficult to identify. And yet, as digital becomes a more ubiquitous tool used by party activists and not just elites, the range of actors available to study begins to increase, facilitating this form of analysis.

Practice

Third, there is a focus on identifying the practice of digital parties. By this term we refer not to the study of intentions which spotlights stated objectives and goals (as articulated in public and private), rather a study of practice looks at what it is that parties actually *do* in regards to each of the 5 pillars. Previous work in this tradition has used a range of methods, but it is perhaps here that there is most evidence of scholars utilizing tools from beyond the established social science toolkit.

Looking at methods familiar to social science, Baxter et al.'s (2011) study of internet use by parties in the 2010 UK general election campaign used three methods to gather data. They first analysed the content of party and candidate websites, second, traced the extent of parties' social media adoption, and finally, monitored parties' responsiveness to requests for information. This strategy was conducted in accordance with a defined coding framework that assessed, amongst other things, whether parties 'provided opportunities for online interaction and debate' (p.467). Similarly, Serazio (2018, p. 131) focused on a different kind of actor within party political organisations altogether, using elite interviews with political consultants to outline the ways in which 'consultants seek to re-position political narratives from traditional media formats to more pleasurable genres...by scripting campaigns and messages with attentiveness to visual stunts, personal appearance, pop culture and social media opportunities'. In a different way, Gerl, Marschall and Wilker (2018) used an online survey to explore why only some party members and supporters used digital mechanisms for intra-party democracy.

However, in addition to these forms of study, scholars have also begun to integrate and combine these methods with more computational techniques. Studies such as Gibson et al.'s

(2013) analysis of virtual grassroots spaces and their relationship with more formal party websites therefore used semi-structured interviews, qualitative content analyses of three blog sites, audience/user statistics and hyperlink network analysis. These techniques allowed the research team to map intentions and practices, providing a range of insights.

The study of practice is therefore wide and can vary dramatically in scope. Whilst some scholars will have an interest in parties' internal adoption of digital tools, others will focus on practices such as digital campaigning. Whilst the precise object of analysis can vary, this form of scrutiny allows scholars to trace how digital is actually used, and (related to the last section), how this differs from intentions.

Implication

Finally, we argue that scholars interested in digital parties can also generate insights into the implications of different practices. By implications we mean the outcomes (empirical and theoretical) that arise from digital parties existence or from the specific digital activities that parties engage in within each pillar. Work on implications can run in two directions. A first tradition can look at the implications of parties' use of digital (on society, citizens, our understanding of parties), whilst a second can look at the implication of digital for parties (studying how parties are having to react to developments online).

The first tradition is perhaps the more familiar, as a wealth of studies have sought to map and theorise the implications of digital party practices. In this style Følstad, Johannessen and Lüders (2014) used interviews with eleven users of a political party website to explore their views of website features in terms of information, engagement, mobilization, and interaction. They sought to contribute 'new understanding of how different features of political party websites affect users' experiences', generating insights into the implications of different practices. In a similar manner Lee (2014) asked whether constituency level web campaigns empowered local supporters. This study used secondary survey data, content analysis of websites from one region of England, and semi-structured interviews to conclude that whilst campaigns are keen to adopt new technology, they have eschewed the interactive potential of this technology. Other studies have used experimental techniques to determine the impact of digital practices. Kruike-meier et al. (2013), for example, conducted both a scenario-based survey-embedded experiment and a laboratory experiment to test the effects of personalized and interactive online political communication. Studies under this heading can therefore focus on a wide range of questions and gather data for analysis in many different ways - what is common is an interest in effects.

The second type of work looking at implications focuses instead on the impact that digital has had on parties. Jensen (2017), for example, used his study to ask whether campaign supporters' social media communications affect the communications of campaigns in some consequential manner' (p.24). To answer this, he used computational methods to collect tweets and retweets from Twitter's API, producing a data set of 22,408 items. Account types were then coded as belonging to one of four categories using natural language processing to match key words and phrases and a random sample which checked to detect coding error. Using such methods, he was able to find little evidence that Twitter was empowering supporters and affecting parties' behaviour. This alternative focus therefore gathers data on how parties are being affected by changes beyond their control.

In presenting these four types of analysis it is, of course, the case that many studies can generate more than one type of data. Metz et al (2019), for example, conducted a quantitative content analysis of German parliamentary members' Facebook posts - which were gathered using the extracting tool Facepager. This data was used to, first, classify and trace the

professional, emotional, private self-personalization practices of politicians on Facebook, and second to examine the effects of each strategy. Insights were therefore provided at the level of practice and implications. What we hope to have achieved by discussing available methods and approaches in this way is to show the very different approaches, tools and techniques that can be used to study the 5 pillars of parties' digital activities. Rather than possessing a standard tool kit, scholars of digital parties can utilise different approaches. In particular, within this overview, we have discussed examples which use web-scraping tools, natural language (or advanced quantitative) processing techniques and online experiments to generate insights. This suggests that scholars of digital parties should not be confined to using established social science methods, but can also beneficially utilise other less familiar data collection and analysis techniques.

The Challenge of Studying Digital Parties

In recognising the different types of study that scholars of digital parties may wish to undertake, and outlining the many different forms of analysis that scholars have already begun to mobilise, it appears that there are a range of different approaches that can be taken. In many ways, this is likely to be reassuring to scholars as it appears that the digital party is just the latest iteration of a long-standing process of party evolution and change (Mair, 2002; Dommett, 2020) to which established methods can be applied. However, we argue that the study of digital parties is in many ways distinct from what has come before. Indeed, we argue that digital parties pose new challenges for researchers. At a theoretical level, digital parties have fundamental implications for our understanding of what a party is (as they can now exist as solely online organizations), how parties are organized, what parties do, and what the impact of their online behaviour is. Yet, at the methodological level they also have implications for the type of data scholars gather, the type of analysis it is necessary to deploy, and for the claims that can be made from different data sources. The study of digital parties, therefore, can be frustrated by certain traits that are inherently linked to digital. In this section, we discuss the challenges posed by rapid change, data scope and accessibility, before thinking about the skills that researchers need to possess.

The study of digital parties is marked out from previous forms of analysis because it focuses on a field that is rapidly changing and difficult to gather data on. Rather than being a static medium, digital technology changes rapidly over time. Indeed, in just over a decade parties have gone from using simplistic websites and email, to deploying sophisticated targeted advertising, content production and dissemination tools. The rapid emergence of these new affordances makes it difficult to keep abreast of current practice. It is therefore hard to determine what should be studied, and what data is available at any given point in time. Bosetta's (2018) study of digital architecture on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat indicatively showed that platforms are 'subject to rapid and transformative change' with available data and analytics changing within the course of even one campaign (p.492). The significance of change, whilst not novel to digital practices, is particularly notable online where there is a tendency - captured in Facebook's motto - to 'move fast and break things' (Vaidhyathan 2018, p.28). It also has far reaching implications for scholars of digital parties as it is challenging to know what should be studied, let alone how it can be analysed. As Dutton suggests, we must traverse the fact that 'the study of digital politics is more subject to demands to focus on the latest technological innovation' – and the subsequent methodological challenges therein – whilst ensuring that 'agendas do not simply chase the most recent technical innovations, but pursue more fundamental questions' (2020, p.xx-xxi).

A study of digital parties also confronts a challenge of scale and capacity when compared to analyses of parties offline. To illustrate this point, it is useful to consider the example of election

campaign material. Whilst offline campaign leaflets have to be printed and distributed manually at high cost and taking significant time, online campaign materials can be designed, sent, evaluated and altered with limited cost and time investment. This means that there can be a greater quantity of data produced online. Indeed, coverage of the US election led to claims that in just the Trump campaign:

‘On any given day... the campaign was running 40,000 to 50,000 variants of its ads, testing how they performed in different formats, with subtitles and without, and static versus video, among other small differences. On the day of the third presidential debate in October, the team ran 175,000 variations’ (Kreiss and McGregor 2018, p.173-4).

The amount of content that can be generated online is therefore often exponentially larger than that evident offline. This raises significant challenges for scholars as it is not only difficult to gather and identify such material, it is also hard to analyse or even fully appreciate the content of such material (especially if using manual coding techniques). The study of digital parties therefore raises issues of scale, particularly in regards to what offline methods are able to capture and analyse.

Attempts to study digital parties can also raise issues around access - both online and offline. As has been widely documented in recent years, access to party activities is often challenging. The existence of privately-owned infrastructure (such as Facebook or WhatsApp) means that data is often not freely available to researchers (Bosetta 2018; Margetts 2017). This makes it difficult for analysts to retrospectively gather data that matches their research questions. It can also lead analysts to focus on available data sources (such as Twitter which has a public API), meaning that some aspects of digital party activity are understudied, whilst others receive disproportionate attention (see for example, Karpf et. al. 2015).

Yet issues of access are not only experienced when using computational methods. Political parties and the actors that inform their digital work are also the potential focus of much qualitative and survey analysis, but here too issues of access can arise. These problems largely mirror methodological issues in the offline world in which participants ‘are usually very busy and have to be provided with some convincing motivation for seeing a researcher’ (Burnham et. al. 2004, p.208). However, in a climate of the increasing professionalisation of parties’ digital activities, it has become common for parties to contract work to digital experts. This trend has led to a proliferation of non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) which prevent many actors involved in parties’ digital activities from participating in research. This can make it particularly difficult to gather insights about intentions, but also about party practices. In addition, it is notable that the number of people within parties who are responsible for digital is often minuscule. This places a large burden on a small number of individuals when it comes to requests from researchers to conduct qualitative research or surveys. Issues of capacity - whilst not exclusively related to digital - can therefore impact on research.

These issues are not insurmountable. Indeed, there have already been developments that mitigate some of these effects. The move by some platforms to provide access to researchers (such as the Social Science One initiative), and the emergence of new social enterprises who gather and analyse data in real time (such as Who Targets Me, a UK initiative tracing digital advertising practice) help to overcome some issues of access and data collection. Despite these advances, it remains the case that scholars of digital parties confront challenges that are particular to a study of practices online. Whilst being able to draw on established methods, therefore, it is also necessary for scholars to think about and respond to the distinct aspects of digital parties.

In addition to challenges that arise from the nature of the digital trends and data that researchers want to gather, scholars of digital parties also face challenges that relate to the range of competencies that research in this area appears to require. As detailed above, a wide range of methods are being used to study digital parties, many of which differ to established political science tools. Indeed, new techniques such as digital ethnography, data scraping and sentiment analysis can and are being used to generate insights about parties online. This tendency expands the range of possible tools available for analysts, but it also raises questions of capacity by highlighting a need for scholars to possess (or at least understand) a range of new techniques and skills. This requirement is problematic because, as Margetts has powerfully noted, much methodological guidance and training for political scientists gives the impression that: '...the toolkit of methodologies for political science was pickled sometime in the 1990s, and they are not going to change' (2017, p.202). Indeed, much training given to scholars of parties in the political science tradition continues to focus on the established divisions and methods and pays limited attention to developments in the online world. Party scholars therefore often do not possess the skills required to conduct big data analysis (Margetts, 2017, p.204). This poses a significant challenge for those scholars interested in digital parties as it limits available tools and prevents the cross fertilisation of different approaches.

There are different responses that can be made to this challenge. First, it is possible to extend existing methodological training to include digital technologies. Courses in digital methods are beginning to emerge, and software packages such as R are enabling scholars to conduct quantitative textual analysis, for example, and to extract digital content. A second possible response is to pursue greater degrees of collaboration between political scientists and those with computational skills and expertise (Dommett and Bekir, 2020). Such collaboration can help to develop richer measures of online activity with, for example, Tromble and McGregor showing how social science insights can be used to build better measures of engagement than a simple study of social media clicks and shares (2019, p.4-5).

These challenges demonstrate that there is something distinctive about a study of digital parties, and that whilst scholars can draw on a long lineage of methods and approaches when conducting study in this realm, they also need to think about what is distinct. In recognising the unique challenges posed, we argue that there is a need to both learn from the past, but also to draw on new methods and techniques - helping the study evolve.

Conclusion

The above analysis has outlined the approaches and challenges that scholars of digital parties face when conducting their research. We described the methods that those who study party politics employ offline and the ways in which they differ to the study of parties online. In doing this we highlight four areas that those interested in studying the 5 pillars of digital parties might pursue: classification, intention, practice and implication. Classification is conducted by those that seek to identify and categorise the way in which digital characterises party activity; understanding intention is to highlight the objectives, aims and stated ideals of political actors (both at the elite and grassroots level) within parties; a focus on practice is the study of what parties actually *do* (beyond merely their intentions); implication means to reflect (both empirically and theoretically) on the outcomes that arise from the existence of digital parties and/or from the specific digital activities parties engage in (either as a challenge to society at large, or specifically to the party itself). Whilst we have separated these four types of analysis into ideal types it is, of course, perfectly plausible - and indeed desirable - that research will generate data from more than one area. For example, it is likely that a researcher might study both what digital parties intend to achieve, and actual outcomes in practice.

We have also suggested that the study of digital parties presents important challenges to those engaging in the field. First, it is rapidly changing - as such it is hard to determine what should be studied and how best to do it. Digital also presents an unprecedented challenge of scale, with content often exponentially larger than is evident offline. This can lead to an effective pragmatic empiricism in which researcher's ask questions led by the availability of data itself, analysing what we can rather than addressing the range of research questions we would like to (or, indeed, should). Issues of access are also prevalent, not least in the proliferation of NDAs for those that conduct digital work within parties. Organisationally parties often employ a small number of individuals to conduct their online activities, which raises questions with regards to capacity.

Finally, we suggested that there are important questions to ask surrounding competency. A wide range of methods are being used in this field, many of which may be new to those of us trained in classical political science (and party politics) methods courses. We pose two, by no means mutually exclusive, solutions to this: the first is to update our existing methods courses to take into account these new digital affordances, the second is to pursue a far greater and deeper collaboration outside of traditional research silos with, for example, those that work in the computational sciences and machine learning.

We conclude by simply stating that many of these issues may well seem like something that might face any researcher, in any research field, at any time. Yet we argue that there are challenges outlined above that are particular to studying the online world as it relates to parties. In the past few years we have seen a range of episodes and perceived scandals - from Cambridge Analytica to the growing influence of Facebook - that have caused politicians, the public and, yes, political scientists to reflect on the ways in which politics ought to work in the 21st century. We argue that these questions are not merely normative or empirical but also fundamentally methodological. Indeed, if broader questions are being asked about the proper functioning of democratic society by those within parties and legislatures then it is only natural, and necessary, that researchers should reflect on these challenges too (see Bennett and Lyengar 2008; Bimber 2015; Karpf et al. 2015; Dutton, 2020b). In this sense, we hope this chapter represents the continuation of a conversation, not the final word.

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