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Editorial: Data-Driven Campaigning in a Comparative Context—Toward a 4th Era of Political Communication?

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Abstract

Contemporary political campaigning takes place both online and offline, and can be data-driven. In this piece, we review existing knowledge around data-driven campaigning (DDC) and introduce the new contributions made by the pieces within this thematic issue. We reveal how the studies included in this thematic issue of *Media and Communication* contribute to this existing knowledge by providing an up-to-date account of how DDC in general, and political microtargeting in specific, have been employed in election campaigns between 2021 and 2023, in a range of countries: France, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the US. As a collection, these studies highlight the variance that exists in the degree to which DDC is practiced, the range of DDC tools used, and attitudes toward DDC. In recent election campaigns, DDC takes many forms, and disapproval of DDC varies depending on how it is implemented.

Keywords

data-driven campaigning; digital campaigning; elections; microtargeting; personalisation; political advertising; political communication; public attitudes; targeting

1. Introduction

Digital technology has become an established part of election campaigning over the last decade. With an unprecedented number of elections happening internationally in 2024, this thematic issue provides important insight into our understanding of modern campaigning around the globe. Offering empirical insight from a range of different cases, in this thematic issue we take the opportunity to review what we mean by data-driven campaigning (DDC) and what we know about practice internationally.

The term “data-driven campaigning” can mean “significantly different things to different people within a campaign” (Baldwin-Philippi, 2019, p. 2) and scholarly understandings of DDC differ in terms of the activities that are involved and the particular practices that characterize it (Dommett, Kefford, & Kruschinski, 2024). Some have emphasized different activities as indicative of the phenomenon, citing the significance of campaigns being guided by data rather than instinct (Munroe & Munroe, 2018), voter targeting (Anstead, 2017; Brkan, 2020; Römmele & Gibson, 2020), and message testing (Baldwin-Philippi, 2019). Acknowledging the varying definitions of DDC, Dommett et al. (2023) synthesized existing work, defining DDC as follows:

DDC relies on accessing and analysing voter and/or campaign data to generate insights into the campaign’s target audience(s) and/or to optimize campaign interventions. Data is used to inform decision-making in either a formative and/or evaluative capacity, and is employed to engage in campaigning efforts around either voter communication, resource generation and/or internal organization. (Dommett et al., 2023, p. 2)

Given the copious amounts of data that has become available to political parties, in the last decade there has been a considerable amount of work on DDC. Initial work on the topic sought to describe apparently new trends and practices, such as microtargeting, message testing, and the curation of large data sets.

Other scholars have focused less on definition, and more on the notion of technologically driven change. While digital media has long been used for campaigning (Howard, 2005; Stromer-Galley, 2019), recently some scholars have suggested that “contemporary campaigning has entered a new technology-intensive era” (Kreiss, 2016, pp. 3–4). Some have diagnosed or examined the idea of a “fourth era” of election campaigning (Dommett, Power, et al., 2024; Römmele & Gibson, 2020) and others have suggested the advent of “computational politics” (Tufekci, 2014). The degree to which these practices are something “new” has been challenged with research noting the “continuity between emerging data-driven campaigning and older forms of electoral political communication” (Anstead, 2017, p. 296; Baldwin-Philippi, 2019; Kusche, 2020, p. 1). Therefore, for some scholars DDC is not “something inherently novel or only connected to new data sources and collection practices, but rather as a long-standing practice that has evolved over time to incorporate new data forms” (Dommett, Kefford, & Kruschinski, 2024, p. 43).

As with any technological developments, many accounts have sought to emphasize the dangers of these tools and the potential democratic implications of DDC (Zuiderveen Borgesius et al., 2018). Concerns about DDC have been raised about voter surveillance and profiling (Burkell & Regan, 2019; IDEA, 2017; in ‘t Veld, 2017; Kusche, 2020; Nadler et al., 2018). There have also been concerns about microtargeting leading to the erosion of shared democratic debate and information (Gorton, 2016; Judge & Pal, 2021), and the neglect of specific voter groups (Bodó et al., 2017, p. 5; Kusche, 2020, p. 5; Rubinstein, 2014, p. 936).

To assess whether these fears reflect actual practice, researchers have made a range of empirical interventions designed to expose the practice of DDC. First, we now have a range of single-country case studies documenting how data is being used. There is extensive coverage of the US case (Hersh, 2015; Kreiss, 2012, 2016; Nielsen, 2012), as well as some contributions that cover Australia (Kefford, 2021), Austria (Barclay et al., 2024), Canada (Munroe & Munroe, 2018), Germany (Clemens, 2018; Jungherr, 2016; Kruschinski & Haller, 2017), and the UK (Anstead, 2017; Barclay et al., 2024; Dommert, 2019). More recently, some comparative analysis has emerged which aims to document, interrogate, and explain the nature of DDC. Some studies have continued to rely on interviews and observation, with Kefford et al. (2023) studying practice in six countries, and Dommert, Kefford, and Kruschinski (2024) using interviews with over 300 campaigners in five countries to theorize variation across five countries. Others have relied on other data, with Votta et al. (2024) exploiting newly available data from Meta to map the practice of DDC at scale. Elsewhere, Vliegenthart et al. (2024) conducted a large-scale experimental study of attitudes in 28 countries. In a different approach to inquiry, we also have survey-based studies reporting insights into public attitudes toward DDC (Gahn, 2024; Vliegenthart et al., 2024). This work has examined attitudes to data and the impact of microtargeting on voter attitudes and voting behavior (Gibson et al., 2024; Kozyreva et al., 2021; Turow et al., 2012).

Cumulatively, this work has revealed much about DDC, showing it not to be novel or homogenous. Rather, in different contexts, campaigns integrate new technologies that are deployed in heterogeneous ways to advance their specific goals. Moreover, these practices are not seen by citizens to be inherently problematic. These findings suggest that, rather than being a clear threat to democracy, DDC can be enacted in ways that are more or less problematic (Dommert, Kefford, & Kruschinski, 2024). While this existing work has helped to establish DDC as an object of analysis the continually evolving nature of technology and the advent of new elections (which are often a site of innovation) means that ongoing study remains vital. This thematic issue sets out to update our existing understanding with a range of new insights.

2. The Articles in This Thematic Issue

The studies in this issue go beyond earlier work on DDC in providing up-to-date insight into the adoption, implementation, and reception of DDC. The articles include studies of individual countries including France, Germany, The Netherlands, Sweden, and the US, as well as a cross-country comparative analysis of public acceptance of personal data use in microtargeting.

In this section, we group these articles into two key themes: DDC in practice, and public attitudes toward political microtargeting.

2.1. DDC in Practice: Adoption and Implementation

Starting with the case most studied in contemporary accounts of DDC, Franz et al. (2024) and Baldwin-Philippi (2024) revisit and update our understanding of DDC in the context of US parties and elections. Franz et al. (2024) develop an innovative new measure of DDC sophistication based on the extent of uniqueness or tailoring associated with the ads produced by a campaign. Initial results prove significant with higher campaign resources predicting a greater tailoring of ads. Electoral context also matters: Ads are more likely to be tailored for Senate seats and when the race is closer. Finally, the party proves to be

significant with greater tailoring occurring among Democrats and those backing Democrats. Although this first application is restricted to the case of the US, it is clear the measure has wider comparative utility. Baldwin-Philippi's (2024) account similarly seeks to revise and reconceive DDC by highlighting how US scholarly and media accounts have focused almost exclusively on the activities undertaken among candidate campaign teams, overlooking the more mundane but vital work of party organizations to collate, maintain, and analyze data. In restoring that balance her article sets the scene for the European studies of DDC that follow which take a more party-centric approach.

Segesten and Sandberg (2024), Ridout (2024), Fitzpatrick and von Nostitz (2024), and Figeac et al. (2024) study the general implementation of DDC and the use of specific DDC techniques in other nations: Sweden, Australia, France, and Germany. Using interviews with campaign managers, Segesten and Sandberg (2024) show that campaigns' use of DDC is linked to both resources and structure. More professionalized and centralized campaigns are more able to leverage data insights to inform strategies. Notably the three top DDC adopters in the Swedish party system are also the richest. Like Segesten and Sandberg, Ridout (2024) uses interviews with campaign officials. Studying Australian parties' use of DDC, he finds that differences in resources, campaign philosophies, and uncertainties about data translate into considerable variation in DDC. For example, he finds that parties who have more campaign resources are more likely to tailor ads. He concludes that many Australian campaigners do not engage in sophisticated DDC because of insufficient resources, the belief that distributing a single message widely is important, and a lack of confidence in the quality of the obtainable data.

Looking at the use of DDC on social media more closely, Fitzpatrick and von Nostitz (2024) and Figeac et al. (2024) examine their cultivation by parties on two different platforms in two major European democracies—Germany and France. Fitzpatrick and von Nostitz (2024) shed light on the use of Google ads during the 2021 German Bundestag election. Their results show that all German political parties with federal representation made use of Google ads in the campaign, but that this use varied. While most parties used text-based ads the least, the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) and Freie Demokratische Partei (FDP) relied on images and videos. Furthermore, they find that the parties did not target individuals based on gender and only somewhat in terms of age, indicating that the parties did not use microtargeting fully. Figeac et al. (2024) take a somewhat different approach and examine the content of political parties' Facebook posts during the 2022 French parliamentary elections. Given the heavy restrictions on targeted advertising in French election campaigns, they conceive of DDC in a more "bottom-up" light, whereby parties' issue foci during the campaign are driven by the online response to their social media content. They find that parties are not particularly sensitive or responsive to their audience feedback. Instead, they tend to post on issues that they are widely regarded to "own" and are less concerned with shifting to popular preferences or appealing to a specific subpopulation with fine microtargeting strategies.

2.2. Public Attitudes Toward Political Microtargeting

Three articles in this thematic issue take a different focus, studying the reception rather than adoption of DDC to advance our understanding of public attitudes towards political microtargeting. First, Noetzel et al. (2024) use a gaze-cued study to create a typology of citizens' coping behavior with political microtargeting. They find that most individuals seemed to know little about political microtargeting, and that the majority guard themselves against being persuaded by microtargeted messages. Second, Bon et al. (2024) use cross-national

survey data, finding that the extent to which personal data use is deemed acceptable depends on the type of data used (private or non-observable), the demographic aspect that the data relates to (e.g., age or gender), and national context. For example, in Germany, the use of religion for microtargeting is frowned upon. Finally, Minihold and Votta (2024) combined Meta ad-targeting data and survey data to study how political parties use citizens' data to exclude them. They find that few parties explicitly exclude specific citizens, and that citizens perceive the exclusion of others based on their characteristics to be unacceptable, especially when they are excluded because of their migration background. Taken together, these three articles indicate that citizens are not fully opposed to microtargeting. Instead, they oppose the use of specific data for targeting them or for excluding certain demographics.

Overall, this thematic issue advances our understanding of the adoption of DDC and public attitudes towards DDC across national party systems, highlighting variation both across and within countries.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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