

Book Review

Web campaigning, by K.A. Foot and S.M. Schneider, 2006, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Review by Wainer Lusoli

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First things first, I liked this book very much. The volume represents an attempt, largely successful, to contextualise online elections in the US historically, theoretically, methodologically. The present review proceeds in a rather unusual fashion, reflecting the rather unusual format of the volume at hand. *Web campaigning* is indeed a book of many books, touching on multiple sets of literature, methodologies, evidence. To tap this complexity, I will proceed in a Q&A style, addressing what I believe are the most salient aspects of the book.

What is this book about?

At the core, the book examines the candidate-centred online campaigns for House of Representatives, Senate and State Governor seats during three US elections between 2000 and 2004. In this respect, it interrogates the production of campaign Websites by campaign socio-technical networks, built around candidates. More widely, the book charts the changing *context*, *practices* and *techniques* characterising such online campaigns over the period under scrutiny. Even more widely, the book aims to assess the role new communication technologies play in electoral campaigns and, symmetrically, the ‘politics of technology’ in relation with election campaigns. To do so, Foot and Schneider proceed well beyond the time-stamp of their core empirical evidence, to incorporate facts and data from the 1996 and 1998 election and projections to 2012-2020 campaigns. Equally, the volume encompasses primary material drawn from campaigns, data on site producers and users of campaign websites (for both: interviews, focus groups, surveys). Overall, the book provides a well-organised, theoretically original account of the growing importance of the Internet for American electoral campaigns.

How does the argument unfold?

The volume starts from first principles in chapter 1, where the main concepts guiding the inquiry are fleshed out: election structures, campaign networks, web-spheres, practices, techniques. A snapshot of literature on previous elections is also provided. Chapter 2 deals with methodology; it further elaborates on the identification and analysis of electoral web-spheres across time, on the importance of *techniques* in the production of election contents (co-production, linking, convergence), and on the additional methodologies employed in the book. Chapters 3 to 6 deal each with one of the electoral web practices identified by the authors: *informing*, *involving*, *connecting* and *mobilizing*. Each chapter deals with each of the three techniques, plus one ‘quality’ proper of each practice (e.g. empowerment for the *engaging* practice), and so-called tensions deriving from the practice. Chapter 7 identifies some of the drivers of the significant variance in online campaigns; these are linked to the characteristics of the producers, to specific aspects of the campaigns, to dynamics of web production and to the relations between different practices. Chapter 8, the conclusions, further elaborate on the trajectories of online election studies: methodologically, empirically, theoretically.

What did you like about the book?

Quite a lot. I liked the thoughtful framing of online election through the lens of Science and Technology Studies (science, technology and society, in European parlance), following a logical funnel leading from macro context to socio-technical networks, to web campaigning practices, structures for political action and their embedding web-spheres, finally to techniques and 'tensions' generated by web campaigning. I liked how the empirical evidence was marshalled accordingly, to provide an exhaustive portrayal of a rapidly changing web campaigning repertoire, over 6 years. I appreciated the superiority of the dyad 'practice / technique' over other, possible competitors, such as 'strategy / tactics' and 'logics / dynamics' of online campaigns. Not just about nuances, the terms proposed by Foot and Schneider fit much better within the overall STS perspective. The four substantive chapters dealing respectively with informing, involving connecting and mobilizing are persuasive and well-informed. I especially liked the 'Tensions' mini conclusions, which encapsulate the added value of each of the sections. Finally, I liked the notes to the text, which provide direct links to archived version of the websites under discussion. This is, I believe, best practice in times of digital scholarship. Overall, I much enjoyed the digital supplement / installation [<http://mitpress.mit.edu/webcampaigning>], which provides additional and supporting material for the book.

What puzzled you about it?

Quite a bit, in direct proportion to the value of the book. Specifically, a number of doubts descend from how the book is framed. Overall, *Web Campaigning* is a lot about the first stated guiding concern, the import of the Internet on election campaigning, and only limitedly about the politics of technology. The impression that systematisation proceeds logically from above, rather than being grounded in observation, grows stronger while delving deeper into the book. Initially, it is hard to determine how *practices* and *techniques* are arrived at, whether from extant and previous observation, derived from theory or both. Related to that, it may be claimed that *techniques* in themselves may well be frames of practice for the day-to-day handlers of web campaigns, the designers, as well as the users. The tensions between control and decentralisation may partly descend from a tension between these conflicting 'practices'; the Dean/Trippi experience may lead us to lean in that direction. Further to that, users are only hinted at, largely absent from the narrative. Although the focus of the book is on the production of web campaigns, more could have been said about expectations concerning user behaviour, at least, their practices, at best. Web campaigners seem to be catering for an audience that is not fully visible to the reader: who are the informed, the connected, the involved, the mobilised? Practices of production are hardly removed from practices of consumption, *a fortiori* with respect to the Internet. Finally, the STS grand framework, the funnel mentioned above is not returned to adequately in the conclusion; the latter is distinctly focused on the electoral import of the technology, rather than on the politics of the technology. In sum: what are the consequences of the authors' findings for STS studies? For practice-based theorising? What is the shape of electoral socio-technical networks?

What did you not like about it?

Not much, even if a few things do not quite persuade me. Firstly, auxiliary methodologies to web-sphere analysis are not discussed in relation to the wider theoretical framework. Although less original,

they still require contextualising in the wider pursuit of web campaigning ‘practice’. The ‘why not’ prize, in this case, is easily be awarded to field ethnography, a favourite in workplace studies of IT in organisations common in STS studies. Secondly, the ‘mouse’ sign indicating the availability of further digital readings is elusive, I found only 14 of these mice in 209 pages; no mice were found in chapter 7, where they could have linked the text to datasets, interim models or further analysis not reported in the book. Much more could have been done in terms of integration of traditional and digital contents. Also, mice could have been numbered, in the same fashion as notes, to make fruition easier. But alas, pioneering is pioneering. Lastly, I did not like the ‘futurama’ bits, where future online elections strategies were forecast. It may be me, of course, or the practice may be at odds with an STS approach to online elections (at least according to [1, p. 14]).

How does it compare with other titles about online elections?

I believe this volume fits well with existing literature about online elections in general. *Web campaigning* makes a useful, original addition to a growing wave of books, reports and websites dealing with the impact of the Internet and other new media on the electoral process. The book features numerous novel elements of dynamism that place it rather appropriately between literature dealing with online elections ‘statically’ (largely *ceteris paribus*) and longer-wave theorisation on the role of communication technologies in the electoral arena (à la Bimber). It takes a different perspective from the volumes by Owen, Davis, Bimber, Williams, Tedesco, Cornfield, Howard, Pew and IPDI publications.

Does the book deliver what is promised?

In many respects, all too keenly. To start, the book does what it says on the tin, it provide a solid investigation of web campaigning in the United States. Geographically, the book is thoroughly US-based, as promised. However, this is a mixed blessing, as insights from online campaigns in other countries do not feature in the book. Especially, in places where election campaigns are not as loosely structured power networks as is the case in the US. But can we bracket a domain of practice based on a single country, and draw conclusions that are relevant for web campaigning in general? If not, as I suspect, the book delivers a ‘technologically grounded theory of *American* electoral politics’. In terms of time, the book does not really cover 10 years, as is claimed in the introduction. At best, it covers 2000 to today, with impressions from previous campaigns (especially 1998). Though not a decade, this is an awful lot of data to make sense of! Methodologically, more could have been shown of the underlying mass of data, quantitative and qualitative. Although the authors flagged their preference for an interpretive understanding of campaigning practices, fair enough, the only ‘hard’ figures (or soft, for that matter) are presented in chapter 7. However, figures would have helped the reader contextualise many of the arguments presented in chapters 3 to 6. Other than that, all seems in good working order.

Who is this book for?

The volume is accessible to a wide audience of academics, students and practitioners, thanks to outstanding clarity of language and structure. Nonetheless, it is best suited for final year undergraduates, graduates and academics in the field of political communication, election studies and Internet studies.

As to the academics, I would recommend the book to both novices to this field and veterans, for different reasons. Newcomers to Internet and elections will find clear definitions, plenty of context and data on several US competitions. Mind you: this is not a reference book, in that it does not review previous literature systematically; it rather provides an original take on the subject, of course informed by previous studies. At the other end, even though I digested over the years a large part of the teams' intellectual produce (see p. xvii for a useful snapshot), I found the book engaging, thorough and freshly presented by virtue of systematisation, both theoretical and empirical. The book provides a vantage point for those planning to examine 'Web2.0' campaigning at the 2008 election. Along with all else I said, these are the main reasons why I warmly recommend *Web Campaigning* to you.

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Reference

- [1] T.R. Schatzki, Introduction: practice theory, in: *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory*, T.R. Schatzki, K.K. Cetina and E. Von Savigny, eds, New York: Routledge.