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Robin Piazzao

# Connective campaigning: Ground-wars in the digital age

## CONNECTIVE CAMPAIGNING: GROUND-WARS IN THE DIGITAL AGE

This paper aims to analyze the forms taken by digitally enabled ground campaigns for political elections in the last fifteen years in Anglo-Saxon countries. First of all I will develop a theoretical framework allowing a deeper understanding and the categorization of the different cases of digitally enabled ground campaigns. The first step is the revision of the categories of collective and connective action proposed by Benet and Segerberg (2013), in order to develop the concept of connective campaigning. I will then turn to integrating Flanagin, Bimber and Stohl's (2006, 2012) concepts of interactivity and engagement within Stromer-Galley's (2014) controlled interactivity framework, to provide a new theoretical framework useful to compare different forms of digital management of interactions within connective campaigns. The article also develops the concepts of digital and human infrastructure, in order to distinguish the different components of connective ground campaigns. Once the theoretical frame is completed, the article analyses four case studies of connective campaigns: Howard Dean's primary campaign; Obama's presidential campaign in 2008; Bernie Sanders' campaign for the Democratic Party primary in 2016; and finally Labour Party's campaign for the general election of 2019, with a specific focus on the app My Campaign Map developed by Momentum. The comparative analysis shows that all these campaigns combine high personalizability in the level of individual involvement with a medium level of interactivity and tightly controlled engagement. This confirms the results of previous research by Stromer-Galley (2014), according to whom the constraints of electoral competition lead organizers to manipulate the affordances of digital technologies in order to reduce the participants' margins of organizational autonomy; moreover this article adds to Stromer-Galley's reading a specific focus on the interrelation between digital and human infrastructure as affecting both engagement and interactivity patterns.

**KEYWORDS** *Campaigning, Connective Action, Digital Infrastructures, Participation, Political Parties.*

## 1. Introduction

This article has the aim to theoretically frame the new forms taken by ground electoral campaigns in the digital era. The two main features of these new forms of get-out-the-vote efforts (Bedolla and Michelson 2012; Nielsen

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2012), appearing in their purest forms in the Anglo-Saxon countries, are the following: 1) extensive use of digital technologies for data collection and coordination of action; 2) increasing involvement of volunteers that are not formally affiliated with parties, or even the development of campaigns that are based entirely on *ad hoc* organizational networks created from scratch on the occasion of campaigns. It is therefore interesting to understand how these campaigns can affect the organizations dedicated to electoral competition – especially political parties – and the relationship between these and their members/participants. In order to do this I will elaborate the idealtpe of connective campaigning and then develop a theoretical frame useful to analyze and compare the different forms of digital ground campaigning. I will do this by focusing on the two key aspects of these forms of collective action. The first issue concerns the apparent contradiction between the spontaneity of voluntary action and organisational decentralisation on the one hand, both facilitated by digital tools, and the fact that these same technologies are built in such a way as to ensure significant levels of control and coordination of action to campaign leaders; I will thus unveil the trade-off between decentralization and control in connective campaigns, regardig to which each campaign tries to find a specific balancement. The second issue concerns the dualism between the two forms of organisational infrastructure that come into play in digitally enabled election campaigns, that is digital platforms – which I will identify with the concept of digital infrastructure – and the organization of volunteer work in relation to such platforms – human infrastructure.

After developing this theoretical framework, I will compare four cases of connective campaigns along the dimensions of analysis defined in the previous sections, showing how each campaign's specific pattern of integration of digital and human infrastructures configures highly structured interaction and engagement patterns and the ability of campaign leaders to effectively nudge collective action towards campaign objectives whether through platform affordances or human infrastructures even in the absence of pervasive vertical managment, confirming and expanding Stromer-Galley's (2014) analysis on digitally enabled campaigns.

## 2. Defining connective campaigning

Digital technologies have essentially two functions in recent ground electoral campaigns: 1) to facilitate the collection, storage and access to data to target the population and 2) to allow the coordination of the action of volunteers. The first function is a prerequisite of the second: the collection and

access to data is what allows campaigns to determine which types of citizens to direct their persuasion efforts towards. From the point of view of the activities carried out during the campaigns that involve volunteers, this results mostly in two types of actions. The first of these is data entry, or the updating of information about the citizens contacted by volunteers – mainly demographic information or concerning voting intentions. This activity can be performed in different ways depending on the level of access to databases granted to volunteers and the level of control exercised on their work; these may vary from the direct input of the data to the collection of the same and transmission to a person delegated to the task by the management. The second main activity is the creation of contact sheets: the data contained in the database are used to create lists of citizens to contact that are delivered to individual volunteers or to the groups making calls or going door to door. Here too, access levels can vary: ranging from the autonomous creation of spreadsheets by volunteers to the centralized creation of the same.

As far as the coordination function is concerned, it is clear that one of the key Internet affordances, namely the lowering of communication costs (Earl and Kimport 2011), comes into play. Only by allowing fast, easy and almost costless information about the activities to be carried out do digital technologies allow campaigns to coordinate unprecedented amounts of volunteers. This possibility is reflected in different types of actions, most of which are carried forward through the use of digital maps that allow volunteers to know where and when campaigning activities take place – but this can also happen through the creation of mailing lists or whatsapp groups, features often integrated within the maps – and the creation of contact lists that prevent redundant contacts. Some of these activities have a more spontaneous nature, allowing citizens to self-organize to carry on campaigning work according to their own preferences. For example, it is often possible for volunteers to create their own events and promote them through maps and mailing lists; this of course depends on the level of access granted by the owners of the apps and the type of activities allowed.

As is evident from what has been said so far, these forms of campaigning change radically the way in which the activities of volunteers are coordinated. From classic vertical coordination, whereby the highest levels of campaign hierarchies determine the type of actions volunteers have to carry out and communicate them through the intermediate levels of the organization, there's a shift to a scheme in which it is basically digital apps that ensure the coordination of activities. This is done according to different degrees of access allowed by each interface, but in general management is indirect and is exercised through action on the platforms rather than through vertical chains

of command. There are also margins for spontaneous action, allowed both by the possibility of creating ex-novo campaigning groups and events not strictly required by the leadership and by the fact that the ease of information about activities and the absence of barriers to participation – platforms are open or require only digital authentication – allows volunteers to significantly personalize their level of involvement. In fact, except in the case of «super-volunteers» (Bond and Exley 2016) with greater responsibilities and these campaigns are based on the free work of citizens who are not bound in any way to participate to any specific activity: they are free to join when and how they prefer; the lack of mechanisms ensuring the continuity of individual involvement is compensated by the fact that the ease of information allows campaigns to receive participation from a much wider a pool of activists.

These aspects are fully relatable to the categories elaborated by Bennet and Segerberg (2013) in *The Logic of Connective Action*. The authors distinguish between three forms of connective and collective action on two levels. Firstly, connective action occurs when bureaucratic organizations are replaced by digital technologies in the coordination of collective action. This can take several forms. The «purest» form is crowd enabled connective action, where organizations disappear and collective action is entirely organized through social networking platforms that aggregate masses of atomized individuals. On the middle ground between collective action and crowd enabled connective action stands organizationally brokered connective action, which occurs when digital technologies are used to facilitate coordination between pre-existing groups and, once the terms of the collective action are negotiated among these, to disseminate information on the mobilization and open to the involvement of atomized individuals. What is common to the different forms of connective action is that they reduce the dependence on traditional organizational networks, so much so that it becomes possible to mobilize to action individuals who don't have any link other than digital ones with such parties or organizations. Secondly, the authors show that the shift from collective coordination to coordination facilitated by digital technologies leaves more room for the personalisation of involvement. This takes many forms. The most obvious, as already seen, concerns the possibility for individuals to negotiate their involvement according to their own preferences, joining from time to time only the chosen activities without having to account to anyone. Thirdly, in many cases, individuals are given great freedom to express their creativity, both in self-organized actions not decided by the leaders of the mobilizations and in terms of personalization of the frames; since they can participate without being necessarily part of any preexisting organization, they have more room to interpret action according to their own frames rather than those imposed and

controlled by the former, while the use of social networks allows to communicate and spread these meanings.

It is clear that the aforementioned forms of campaigning contain both the typical elements of Benet and Segerberg's connective action, namely the – partial – replacement of organizations with digital technology and the personalizability of individual participation. Consequently, I propose from now on to define the forms of campaigning studied here as connective campaigning or connective ground campaigns.

### 3. The persistence of management

Especially in the United States, starting with the Dean and Obama primary campaigns, the adoption of digital technologies in the organization of ground wars, complemented by the flourishing of unofficial blogs and social network groups in support of candidates, has led to the spread of some decidedly optimistic interpretations of the new course as a return to citizen democracy after decades of increasing professionalization (Nielsen 2012). The new technologies allow growing involvement of citizens in campaigning; an involvement apparently no longer mediated by vertical power relations, as well as enabling the possibility of two-way communication between campaign base and leaders. The relationship between management and volunteers changes: in connective campaigning, the former no longer have the function of dictating the action to the latter, but rather of setting up systems that enable volunteers to participate (Klug and Rees 2019). The very professionals and staffers who produce and manage the applications are often pervaded by an ideological vision of their function and a digital optimism that makes them conceive of their role as mere facilitators of the spontaneous action of volunteers.

But of course there is always a potential trade-off between decentralization and control from the leadership. This is for two main reasons. The first of these is extremely practical and relates to the fact that the leadership needs to make sure that even in the absence of vertical chains of command volunteers act according to the established priorities and modalities. Volunteers must carry out useful activities, without hindering the campaign; moreover, it is important to be able to reconnect the work of the volunteers recruited through the platforms with that of field staffers. This can happen in several ways. If volunteers are granted only low organizational autonomy, staffers can directly exercise their control function during the activities and the planning of the same. When volunteers are left more space to self-organize, that is, in cases where the organizational infrastructure retracts in favor of digital connectivity,

the central organization can no longer directly control each individual's campaigning activity, but can act by directing volunteers through the management of the level of access to data and affordances of platforms. The choice of how to manage and control the volunteers is affected above all by a mere matter of scale: if the ratio between the number of staffers and volunteers is quite high, classic direct management might work; on the contrary, if the volunteers are too many, it becomes necessary to indirectly control them through the affordances of platforms and the partial release of databases. There is therefore a trade-off, typical of connective campaigning, between the reduction of paid staff with managerial tasks and the need to invest more in digital control and coordination technologies. The second control-related issue concerns the fact that the creation of vibrant communities of digitally interacting volunteers leads to the enhancement of debate and scrutiny on the positions and actions of the candidates. This makes it much easier for supporters to find a favourable and interested audience for their grievances and criticisms, which can damage the candidate's image. In this sense, staffers can do relatively little: while they can choose whether or not to integrate discussion forums within the apps and campaign websites, but they cannot prevent the discussion from developing elsewhere, for example within local activist groups and on social networks.

Stromer-Galley (2014) offers a fundamental theoretical contribution to understanding how the leadership of connective campaigns tries to respond to these control problems and what tools they adopt to channel the energies of supporters towards the desired ends. The analysis revolves around the concept of interactivity, meaning: «Interactivity, as a concept, can be thought of as a property of the communication channel that makes feedback possible, either feedback with the computer system or application, or feedback between people channeled through the Internet» (Stromer-Galley 2014, 2).

Interactivity is therefore a key affordance of the Internet, allowing to develop its potential for decentralised communication and coordination. But campaign leaders are not interested in decentralized communication and coordination *per se*, but that such communication and coordination are conducted in a way that is functional to achieving the goals of the campaign and doesn't bypass the established leadership; as a result, they will look for ways to constrain and canalize this interactivity. In this sense, Stromer-Galley speaks of controlled interactivity, referring to the fact that the platforms used for campaigns are built in a way that allows certain interactions, while preventing others. From this point of view, if over time electoral campaigns have increasingly worked to build chances of interaction among supporters, unmediated interaction with the staff or candidates has been generally prevented or strictly controlled from the top. The platforms also allow supporters to access only some

of the data held by the databases, which is aimed at directing their campaigning efforts on the groups selected for them by the management; in general, limiting the affordances of platforms serves to prevent bottom-up control of data and to nudge supporters to carry out the activities decided by the leadership, but also to enhance the tracking of actions.

This should be enough to water down the enthusiasm of those who see in the dynamics of self-organization typical of connective campaigning the new frontier of participatory democracy; of course, broad forms of decentralization and self-organization are possible: but only within the boundaries set by the leadership. This is because platforms and databases are subject to private property: as long as the leadership holds the ownership and therefore the control over the platforms it will be completely free to decide whether or not to make available to users some affordances and data. So if on the one hand connective campaigns enhance the role of volunteers, who are no longer just passive recipients of campaign messages as in modern television-based campaigning (Fisher and Denver 2008; Norris 2002), these are not construed by the management as equal participants but as tools the use of which is to be optimized. The staffs have neither time nor advantage in interacting without filters with volunteers; on the contrary, too much autonomy could lead to problems of control especially since these campaigns have the ability to scale very quickly. It may mislead the fact that volunteers often do not receive direct orders from their superiors, for control of their actions is primarily indirect, through the active construction of the space of interaction and action by the staffs who manipulate the affordances of the platforms and access to data. Connective campaigns are therefore yet another device that construes citizens not as the depositors of sovereign power, but as instruments in the hands of political elites or, in alternative, as potential sources of problems of control.

The concept of controlled interactivity can be linked to theory on intraorganizational barriers by Flanagin, Stohl and Bimber (2006; 2012). According to the authors, the Internet gives the members of organizations the possibility of interacting cheaply and instantly, bypassing the formal channels of intraorganizational communication. Organizers can decide to take advantage of this affordance of the Internet, promoting interactivity – interaction between individuals at the base, both members and not – and/or engagement – interaction between users/members and organizations. While the concept of interactivity is quite intuitive and overlaps with the Stromer-Galley theory, engagement is a more complex one and constitutes the most original contribution of such authors. It is important to note that in the authors' intentions engagement includes both the interactions between the base and the leadership of the campaign, but also the relationship between participants and the



organization as a whole, as well as the ability of the former to determine the structure and functioning of the latter: there is therefore greater engagement when the base has greater autonomy and therefore decision-making power over the structure of the organization of which it is part, for example by creating new sub-organizational units independently or participating in decision-making processes; at the same time, potential control by the volunteers over the structure and affordances of the platforms used by the organization might in turn widen the margins of engagement, configuring a greater freedom by these in the self-management of collective activities.

Organizations can therefore decide to manipulate chances for engagement and interactivity, modifying the level of access to the affordances of the platforms; allowing greater interactivity and engagement means using the Internet to break down intraorganizational communication barriers. The scheme developed by Bimber, Flanagan and Stohl (2006; 2012) has the great advantage, compared to the concept of controlled interactivity, to identify different analytical dimensions and therefore to be a concept that is easier to operationalize and therefore more functional to analytically compare different forms of collective organization.

#### 4. Campaigning infrastructures

As we have seen, the key feature of connective campaigns is the use of digital technologies to expand the amount of voluntary work deployed in persuasive ground efforts. It follows from this that the specific form taken by each campaign depends essentially on two elements: the way in which digital tools are structured and the type of organisation of human work that is adopted. Of course, the two elements interact: on the one hand, the affordances of digital platforms enable or preclude certain actions, channelling the activities of volunteers in the direction desired by the political and organizational leaders of the campaigns; on the other hand, humans can use in different ways the tools made available to them according to their own mode of organization. For this reason, it is necessary to distinguish between the digital infrastructure and the human infrastructure of campaigns; to break down each campaign into these two elements allows to grasp the specific dynamics peculiar to each of them and to compare different organizational models, trying to disentangle the causes and effects specific to each tool and organizational form.

As regards the concept of digital infrastructure, reference should be made to Kreiss (2012). The author has studied the digital infrastructure developed within the Democratic Party, starting from Deans's primary campaign in 2004,

the first significant connective effort, identifying a system of «consultancies and [...] best practices, dedicated tools, and trained staffers that [...] served as an infrastructure for online campaigning that a number of Democratic candidates drew from in 2006 and 2008» (Kreiss 2012, 13).

The infrastructure that is developed is therefore composed of technical artifacts, organizational forms and social practices that constitute the digital pillars of connective campaigns. It is a constant work in progress, which in the case of the American Democratic Party emerges chaotically from the 2004 primary, to be then innovated and updated over time. Election rounds are a powerful stimulus in this sense, configuring temporary accelerations in data collection and database creation and in the innovation of technologies and practices. Given Kreiss' joint focus on technologies, organization and practices, it may appear that the concept is also capable of taking account of the human component of campaigning infrastructures. But this is not the case. Kreiss is in fact in charge of analyzing the practices and organizational forms that govern the *development* of digital technologies and tools in connective campaigns, while my concept of human infrastructure refers to how volunteers are organized in the *use* of the tools developed within the digital infrastructure. The concept is therefore valuable because, in addition to effectively identifying the technological infrastructure, highlights that its development is not a purely technical but social enterprise, influenced in its success by organizational, economic and political factors that need to be analyzed to understand the specific form taken by digital tools.

As for the concept of human infrastructure, reference goes to Tufecki (2017), who discusses the impact of the adoption of digital tools on collective action. Before the digital age, any mobilization held as a prerequisite a huge logistical work, carried out by one or more organizations; this in turn required a network of human relations and structures of transmission of information and orders that constituted the organizational infrastructure that supported the mobilizations. This has changed with the advent of the digital age, for citizens can now exploit lowered coordination and communication cost to substitute part of the functions performed by traditional infrastructures – to the point of coordinating action and pooling resources by simply posting and following threads on twitter and other social networks, exploiting the focusing capabilities of digital platforms (Gerbaudo 2012).

Thus, Tufecki's concept of infrastructure identifies the «how» of the organization of collective action. In this vision, the infrastructure can either exist or not; this is because the concept identifies the work of building the organizational preconditions of collective action. But in digitally enabled action these organizational preconditions are not developed, simply because coordination

of action takes places outside organizations and regardless of them. Or rather: the development of organizational preconditions to action takes place within the walls of digital corporations that develop proprietary digital infrastructures; but it does in fact have little to do, at this stage, with citizen participation. This view, however, conceals the fact that even crowd enabled action is a specific way of configuring collective action, which takes place in close relation to the digital infrastructure. Although there are no pre-existing organizational structures, even in crowd-enabled mobilizations there is the development of relationships between different subjects and a division of work that must not be understated but analyzed and compared with other organizational forms. This is even more significant for connective campaigning, which is not a form of purely connective action but includes various forms of volunteer coordination and different types of alliances and bargains between different components of campaigns and hierarchical stratas<sup>1</sup>. In all these cases, to speak of a lack of human infrastructure would be totally inadequate, because: a) the delegation of coordination functions from organizations to digital technologies is almost always only partial and b) technologies are used in many different ways by humans, who in turn almost never act in solitude without establishing some sort of collective division of labor.

## 5. Comparing connective campaigns

In summary, it is possible to sum up what has been said so far in the following scheme. As regards digital infrastructure, the variables defining each campaign are the following:

- 1) Affordances: the actions that the platform makes available, both to volunteers and staffers – i.e. access to databases, creation and location of events, group formation and management:
- 2) Intraorganizational barriers: how specific digital tools affect engagement – communication between leadership and base and distribution of decision making powers and control over platforms – and interactivity – communication between participants.

As regards human infrastructure, account should be taken of:

- 1) Organizational structures: what is the structure of social relations between the different actors involved in the campaign, i.e. relations between staffers and participants, the nature and structure of volunteer groups

<sup>1</sup> Nielsen (2012) speaks of «campaign assemblages» to refer to the sum of groups, individuals and organizations taking part to each specific campaign.

- 2) Division of labor: which component of the campaign performs what tasks.

I will now turn to compare the most relevant cases of connective campaigns in the Usa and the Uk using the categories developed above. The choice of the cases follows from the fact that, while the Usa are the country that first implemented connective campaigning, the Labour Party in the Uk followed the example while implanting the practices and technologies developed abroad in a much different context, marked by the existence of stronger party-based human infrastructures; this enables the comparison to be grounded on a more varied set of human and digital infrastructures, showing more in depth recurring patterns of adaptation and integration taking place regardless variation in the components of campaigning infrastructures. The aim of the comparison is to show how, in line with Stromer-Galley's approach, connective campaigns show patterns of top-down management even in the absence of overarching vertical chains of command; but while the author concentrates only on interactivity and digital infrastructure, I will show the patterns of adaptation between digital and human infrastructures while focusing on both interactivity and engagement.

### *Dean 2004*

Howard Dean's Democratic Party primary campaign is the first campaign to use the Internet to organize volunteers, while previously it was only used to facilitate the dissemination of electoral information. The main feature of the Dean campaign is the fragmentation and chaotic nature of the digital infrastructure. While databases for targeting are controlled by the digital division of the official campaign – volunteers have no direct access to databases and are therefore not autonomous in contacting voters – the platforms on which volunteer activities are organised are not directly linked to this. Using websites like Meetup and Yahoo! Groups, thousands of Dean supporters begin to organize themselves independently of the official campaign (Connors 2005; William and Tedesco 2006). From the point of view of affordances, the problems with this spontaneous bottom-up approach are two: on the one hand, the websites in question allow to set up local groups of activists but do not put them in communication with each other, complicating the coordination of activities – there is high interactivity, but only within each group and not among groups; on the other hand, since the official campaign does not control the platforms, it cannot use them to track and direct the activities of volunteers. The management tries several actions to increase control over the activities of volunteers:

- 1) Staffers infiltrate the groups born on the websites, presenting themselves as official representatives of the campaign and delivering detailed plans of action to try to guide the activities of groups – a case of top-down engagement;
- 2) The campaign signs an agreement with MeetUp to obtain access to data on the groups supporting Dean;
- 3) The management develops the GetLocal platform, to which it tries, with alternating successes, to move the activities of spontaneous groups.

Given the autonomous spread of unofficial groups, the campaign has a human infrastructure quite unevenly spread on the national territory, with staffers in each state and volunteers concentrated in some areas, especially urban ones. This will be the main reason for the campaign's failure (Hindman 2005). In the absence of the ability to coordinate the activities of volunteers through a single platform, the staffers attempt to use their persuasive power to direct the groups by infiltrating them. In this sense, emerges a central aspect of electoral campaigns: even if the leadership lacks resources to enforce its will through the digital control of interactivity and engagement, aim alignment between leadership and volunteers is an extraordinary instrument through which it is possible to obtain the voluntary subordination of volunteers: in fact, they accept the leading role of the official campaign staff even if the latter does not have any formal power over them, for the simple fact that they recognize the need to coordinate the efforts and subordinate the overall strategy to the higher hierarchical levels in order to make the campaign effective (Trippi 2005).

After the campaign, Dean assumes the role of chairman of the Democratic Party and launches his «fifty-states strategy», with the aim to spread and consolidate the use of digital tools in election campaigns by creating permanent groups of campaigning activists, spreading and codifying the practices tested and integrating the digital databases and platforms used by the campaign within a coherent digital infrastructure available to the party and its candidates (Kreiss 2012).

### *Obama 2008*

Thanks to the practical experimentation and technologies made available by Dean's campaign, Obama's primary and presidential campaigns in 2008 already benefit from a centralized digital infrastructure on the MyBo platform. The platform, in addition to hosting a digital map to post and join groups and events, personal blogs of volunteers and tools to organize online fundrais-

ing, allows easy access to voter data (Abroms and Lefebvre 2009). Volunteers can autonomously access voter contact data, create walk-sheets, see who has already been contacted and with what results and finally perform data entry. At the same time, the Narwhal database is structured in such a way as to increase tremendously the tracking and data extraction capabilities of the campaign, through the ability to access the contact details on social media and users' phones and reorganizing them accordingly to the campaign outreach priorities. Various apps allow volunteers to prioritize their personal contacts through the labels produced by the campaign, giving the two-step flow an unprecedented systematization.

This marks the transition to a model of connective campaigning platform that is deliberately volunteer-centered (Lees-Marshment and Pettitt 2014; McKenna and Han 2015): volunteers are not directed, through the platform, towards specific contact targets but are empowered to self-organize to contact individuals on the databases. This translates into greater freedom to personalize individual involvement: it suffices to have an Internet connection to begin canvassing or phone calling at any time, without having necessarily to deal with staffers or coordinate with other people to get the data; the coordination function is supplemented by the platform, which, thanks to data entry by the volunteers, tracks the contacts already made and their outcomes (Bimber 2014; Plouffe 2009). In fact, this ensures that the back office assignments of the staffers are reduced, since these are increasingly delegated to volunteers that see their responsibilities increase. At the same time, however, the campaign does not entirely renounce to exercise control over volunteers; the staffers, freed from back office mansions and data entry, can dedicate themselves to overall strategic planning and supervision of groups of volunteers (Isseberg 2012). Although the campaign allows the spontaneous creation of groups, in fact the staffers exert a control over them through the training of super-volunteers who are supported in taking command in local groups and who have the function of coordinating the activities of volunteers with priorities established by staffers. The campaign therefore shows very high levels of interactivity, both in offline groups and among groups and individuals through the platform; at the same time, the engagement with the staff is structured through the mediation of super-volunteers, who act as a buffer between the base and the leadership of operations; again, the nature of engagement is essentially controlled and top-down; for volunteers it is possible to receive instructions from the staff, but not to communicate directly with them.

Obama's digital campaign shows some apparently contradictory characteristics. On the one hand, it intensifies tracking and data mining of volunteer activities and social networks. On the other hand, it guarantees greater

organizational autonomy to the latter; but this autonomy is compensated by two strategies aimed at maintaining the capacity of direction by the leadership of the campaign, namely:

- 1) The structure of the database interface, which directs outreach actions of volunteers towards the established objectives of the campaign while leaving room to organize activities to fulfill those objectives to groups or individuals;
- 2) The constant monitoring of volunteer groups by dedicated staffers through the relationship with selected super-volunteers; also in this case, the tendential subordination of volunteers to management is a consequence of aim alignment and the recognition of the superior competence of staffers and super-volunteers.

### *Sanders 2016*

The case of the campaign for the 2016 Bernie Sanders primary is interesting because, despite the more than ten years of experimentation and innovation of the Democratic Party in connective campaigning, the Sanders team finds itself in an unknown terrain, testing to the limit the potential of digital tools and decentralization. First of all, the outsider Sanders suffers from a chronic shortage of resources. This prevents him from recruiting an army of staffers, as Obama did. Sanders' campaign is rich in volunteers but poor in staff; the solution is therefore to use the volunteers to replace all the local staffs, dividing the work of each potential staffer between two or more part-time volunteers. The digital tools available to volunteers are designed in such a way as to allow the work to be split between several part-time volunteers; for example, a tool is developed that allows users to upload photos of the data-sheets collected during canvassing, so as to separate data collection and data entry tasks and to coordinate them remotely. The creation of this network of volunteers takes place entirely from scratch, through major events called «Barnstorms» in which the central Sanders team crosses the nation in order to create autonomous local campaigning groups. During the Barnstorms, sub-committees are created, each dedicated to specific tasks and coordinated through the creation of Whatsapp and Slack groups to keep the volunteers in contact with each other and with the national staff. In turn, among the volunteers who participated in each Barnstorm are created sub-committees dedicated to replicating the event in other locations without the support of the national staff (Grim 2019).

In some ways, this approach follows a logic that is opposite to that of previous connective campaigns. These usually develop a digital infrastructure to which volunteers have free access and, after that, work to harmonize spontane-

ous and managed efforts within an organizational infrastructure «running» on it. Despite strong staff interference, especially in the case of Obama, there is room for volunteers to organize themselves directly through platforms. This poses the issue of affordances and access to databases: more contained in the case of Dean who could not count on the supervision of local staffers, more open in Obama who has more resources of human coordination. In the case of Sanders, however, it is not possible to access the digital infrastructure without being part of one of the local volunteer groups; groups to which much more work is delegated than it is the case in other campaigns and which are decidedly more autonomous in the execution of the activities, but which are created directly by the leadership in a top-down fashion and to which specific tasks are assigned at the moment of creation. In this case, the digital infrastructure is composed of contact-tracing software and telecommunications structures that support groups and put them in contact with national coordinators.

Only if the volunteers agree to voluntarily subordinate to the hyper top-down approach developed by Becky Bond and Zack Exley (2016) it is possible to maintain organizational coherence. Volunteers must be willing to accept that they have to perform an extremely tiring and repetitive job, that they can make suggestions but do not possess significant decision-making powers; also for the leaders of the volunteer groups the rule is to subordinate to the higher command level. How is it possible for volunteers to accept such a form of agreement? According to the authors, it is the presence of a common and revolutionary goal that makes the volunteers agree to subordinate themselves as pawns to the great plan of the campaign. The recruitment of volunteers is based on a dual communication mechanism. Firstly, direct communication of the plan in which they will be involved and their role in it, without frills. Secondly, the promise to become part of a revolutionary movement, whose goal is not to experiment here and now temporary forms of self-government within the campaign, but to try to create a mass movement to change the country. So in this approach it is important that the volunteers consider the candidate credible and inspiring in his promise of anti-establishment insurgency; in addition, this almost «militaristic» framing of the campaign has the function of giving volunteers a stake in the campaign, since from their diligence entirely depends the success of the effort.

### *Labour Party 2017-2019*

In 2017, Momentum, the organization set up to support the socialist leader Jeremy Corbyn in internal conflicts within the Labour Party, developed the application My Nearest Marginal – since 2019 called My Campaign Map.



It is the first connective campaigning instrument adopted by the Labour Party. My Campaign Map is literally a map of the UK, divided by constituency, each of which is colored in a more intense shade of red the more marginal the specific constituency is – i.e., if in the last election there were few votes of difference between Labour and other parties. Anyone can access the tool by entering their postcode, then the map shows the user an ordered list of campaigning activities close to him. My Nearest Marginal listed events only by chronological order, while My Campaign Map uses an algorithm that crosses the priority level of the individual seat with the tracking of the level of activities carried out in each place: if the app realizes that there are too many activists heading to a place, it makes it loose priority (Klarke 2019; Rhodes 2019). When it comes to users, who do not necessarily have to be enrolled in the party as the platform is open-access, two levels of activity are possible: use the map to identify individual events or connect to the Whatsapp groups of each constituency to support more continuously the activities organized locally by the party and Momentum. As for the creation of events, there are two levels of filters in the platform: the first is the requirement to be members of the party; the second concerns the approval of each event by the central staff of Momentum.

From a series of interviews carried out with activists of Momentum engaged in the campaign for the general election of 2019<sup>2</sup> emerges that, if the adhesion to campaigning is extremely free and open, the activities continue to be organized from people with positions of leadership in the local networks of the party or Momentum. This is because the map does not provide common users with access to party databases with voter data; in order to be able to canvass effectively, which is the main activity in the British campaigns, they need to get in touch with a local group that organizes a session and holds the walk-sheets with the list of people that have to be contacted<sup>3</sup>. At the same time, other types of events are also put on the map especially by local activists with medium to long-term organizational responsibilities within party networks; this is because of the filters placed on the creation of events. Therefore, if My Campaign Map is extremely open with regard to the call to action, in fact it does not overturn the logic of the way specific campaigning activities are organized: simply, it guarantees a) greater personalizability of individual involvement and greater ease to find information on how to be useful without being part of local networks and b) it allows a «connective» expansion of the pool of local

<sup>2</sup> The interviews have been held with 10 activists active in 10 different constituencies located in major British cities.

<sup>3</sup> The way in which access to databases is structured means that it is the activists who create the WhatsApp groups, precisely because anyone else would have difficulty in leading campaigning activities without access to data.

volunteers. The platform therefore allows a medium level of interactivity as it is possible for users to interact, but only within WhatsApp groups and events created specifically by local leaders and put on the map by them; the level of engagement is relatively low: only those who are already inside the organization at the local level can in fact manage the organization of the activities through the platform; in fact it is once again a form of top-down engagement, aimed at the constrained construction of the field of action of volunteers.

## 6. Conclusions

After developing the concept of connective campaigning and a grid to analyze and compare the different empirical manifestations of this, I have analyzed some specific cases. The case analysis confirms Stromer Galley's thesis, which sees connective campaigns as fundamentally top-down controlled efforts, although in forms updated to the digital age through the partial replacement of vertical management by the management of digital platforms. The cases analyzed also allow to expand the considerations of the author (2014), in two directions: first I recognize the existence not only of controlled interactivity, but of both controlled interactivity and controlled engagement; it is above all some forms of engagement that are tightly structured, especially the relationship between staff and volunteers and through the impossibility, for the volunteers, to change how the platforms work and from which affordances their action is defined; interactivity is often left relatively free, precisely because specific limits are defined to the freedom of volunteers through the constraining of engagement. A form of engagement that is not always strictly controlled is the possibility of volunteers to create new groups in an autonomous and «entrepreneurial» way (Flanagin *et al.* 2006, 2012): almost all campaigns provide for such an option – although they try, as seen in the cases of Obama and Labour, to exert a power of influence over the groups; only the Sanders campaign, the most «collectivist» version of connective campaigning, reverses the process of group formation, turning it into a process controlled by the leadership of the campaign.

In addition, unlike Stromer-Galley, I've showed how the control of interactivity and engagement not only occurs through top-down control and manipulation of the affordances of platforms, but depends on the structuring and mutual integration of digital and human infrastructures. In particular, with focus on human infrastructures, two elements emerge: 1) one organizational aspect, related to the ability of the staffers to direct not only the operation of the platforms, but also the way volunteers use the platforms, transforming

some affordances endowed with a potential of organizational decentralization in mere tools of work-extraction; 2) a cognitive aspect, that is the adjustment of volunteers to a frame that sees the official management as the real and only «owners» of the campaigns, to which the ultimately must subordinate in order to ensure the success of the effort.

In conclusion, the cases analyzed show the existence of compensatory mechanisms in the structuring of digital and human infrastructures, managed directly by the leadership of the campaigns and aimed at maintaining control over the actions of volunteers: the more platforms allow access to data and the affordances of the Internet to volunteers, the more the human infrastructure is organised in a way that compensates for these forms of decentralisation by applying other mechanisms of control and constraint on the activities of volunteers – this is especially the case with Obama and Labour. The more the human infrastructure is able to act autonomously, the more leaders will attempt to control platforms and data – as in Dean. In the extreme case of the Sanders campaign, the leadership decides to exert control both on group formation and digital infrastructures.

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