Computer-mediated Communication

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Political entities across the world use digital or "computer-mediated" communication (CMC) technologies to create, obtain, and engage with political information. Internet-based technologies – including websites, blogs, and social media – predominate, supplemented by applications designed for mobile devices and other emerging platforms.

Use of CMC for political purposes, which has become commonplace in the 2000s, pre-dates the World Wide Web. In the 1980s, publicly funded online services in Western Europe, Australia, and Brazil, and privately funded ones in the United States, provided political information. Innovations involving interactivity also appeared. An interactive service provided by a cable TV operator in northern Ohio during this period enabled subscribers to participate in opinion polls and provide instant feedback during City Council meetings. In the early 1990s, third-party U.S. presidential candidate Ross Perot pushed the idea of "electronic town halls," a mechanism for citizens to tell experts and policy makers their views through a computerized referendum.

The use of computers for political purposes gained traction after the emergence of the Web and grew along with it through the latter half of the 1990s. In Britain, the Labour Party was one of the first in the world to launch a website, in 1994, and although relatively few Britons were online in time for the 1997 election, both major parties as well as individual candidates used the medium to disseminate information. In the U.S. election of 1996, about 12 percent of the voting age population reported that they used the Web for political or policy information, while 3 percent of voters said it had been a principal source of election news, according to the Pew Research Center.

In the 2000s, opportunities and demand for political communication have kept pace with the steady growth in online populations. Throughout the developed world, political actors, journalists, and citizens currently make extensive use of CMC for activities that previous generations conducted offline. The websites of the 1990s were supplemented by blogs in the early 2000s and later by various forms of social and mobile media.

Political actors: The ability to provide information directly to citizens, bypassing news media gatekeepers cheaply and effectively, is a primary benefit of digital technologies for candidates, office-holders, and their supporters. Despite the inherent interactivity of CMC, political actors have been far more pro-active in disseminating information across available digital platforms than in responding to input or engaging in dialogue. Websites include biographical information, accomplishments, policy initiatives or positions, press releases, and calendars. Social networking sites and microblogs have become indispensable for quickly disseminating news and views, as well as for creating and countering spin, and communication staffs now typically include social media specialists.

Besides hosting these public relations functions, the Internet has become a primary vehicle for political advertising, as CMC has blurred the line between these two formerly distinct forms of strategic communication. With much advertising through traditional media such as television heavily regulated or enormously expensive or both, low-cost online platforms have gained popularity and influence. The growing availability of wired and wireless broadband access, including in the developing world, has made video a widely used format for online political advertising. Video file-sharing sites offer unfettered ability to deliver creative, high-impact political messages as well as longer-form narratives that do not work well on television (Salmond 2013).

CMC has affected political fund-raising, particularly in the United States, where the amount spent on securing office continues to skyrocket. The Internet has become a primary vehicle for soliciting and processing financial contributions to candidates and causes. Ubiquitous "click to donate" icons, backed by secure and simple credit card processing capabilities, on the websites of candidates and support groups facilitate raising money online at minimal cost to the fundraising entity.

Online fundraising is so successful in part because of the microtargeting capabilities afforded by CMC, which combine the use of digital "cookies" with data about individual users covering demographic and psychographic information plus consumer and voting behavior. Microtargeting enables political actors to quickly match specific messages to specific citizens, for instance in response to a breaking news event or to a statement by an opponent. It is widely used for online get-out-the-vote efforts, enabling political communicators to devise messages narrowly targeted to mobilize individual voters to cast their ballots. The Internet Advertising Bureau reports that microtargeted advertising accounted for $200 million in ad spending during the 2012 U.S. presidential campaign.

Other engagement efforts also take place primarily through CMC. Online petitions that citizens can "sign" electronically, typically by providing their name and email address, are in widespread use. Traditional political organizations use CMC to recruit and coordinate volunteers who serve as community campaign liaisons. And some newer organizations could not exist at all without CMC. An example is the "Pirate Party" movement, which originated in Sweden in 2006 with a platform focused on copyright and other free speech concerns. It has spread to dozens of other countries and has gained representation in national and European elections; activists use digital technology to instigate and organize "flash mobs" and to communicate with supporters.

Other political entities using CMC include political parties and other umbrella organizations; government agencies and entities; and international bodies such as NGOs whose work involves political negotiation and engagement. The virtually unlimited holding capacity of the Internet makes it an ideal repository for information-collection forms. It houses archives of historical and contemporary civic documents at all levels of government, and vast databases of material related to the functioning of modern political states. Digital technologies additionally enable government entities to conduct difficult-to-detect surveillance of CMC users' online activities and to process the data such surveillance yields.

Political journalists: CMC has changed political reporting, which journalists typically identify as central to their civic role. Print and broadcast news outlets provide political information through their websites and other formats that include social media, mobile and tablet technologies, aggregation services, and email. Content on those digital platforms is increasingly unlike content in the "legacy" medium, with differences in modality (a print medium including video), capacity for interaction, and format (such as blogs, archival material, or ballot-building tools). Increased use of social media has changed the nature and pace of reporting from the campaign trail. Another emerging trend in political journalism is

the use of "big data," large databases that help journalists unearth and explore relationships among political actors, actions, and outcomes.

New political journalism is produced by staffers at online-only sites dedicated to coverage of politics, government, and civic affairs. Some, such as Politico.com, retain a focus on relatively traditional daily reporting, combined with extensive commentary and visual content. Other "watchdog" journalism sites devote their resources to investigative journalism about political actors and actions, or to particular aspects of civic affairs such as education reform or climate change. Aggregators and search engines, while not journalistic entities themselves, play an increasingly formidable role in shaping citizens' political news agendas according to individually tailored searches.

Since the early 2000s, political bloggers have steadily gained attention and influence as conveyers of political news and views. These include individual and group blogs associated with legacy media outlets, such as those aggregated on the BBC's Democracy Live site; online-only large-group blogs such The Huffington Post, which in addition to its U.S. site has international editions in Europe and Asia; and innumerable individual and small-group blogs devoted to political issues and perspectives in every country. The latter typically develop narrowly defined areas of expertise or influence, offering highly partisan perspectives or focusing on a single aspect of government, such as the courts. Political bloggers commonly use extensive links to creation connections with other online content.

In recent elections, some political journalists have fashioned themselves as dedicated "fact checkers." Their role is to scrutinize statements of candidates and officeholders for veracity, coherence with past actions or remarks, and context; their published findings are typically placed on a continuum between truth and falsity. Politifact.org, a widely cited fact checker affiliated with the *Tampa Bay* (Florida) *Times,* covers national U.S. politics, with affiliates operational in Australia and a number of U.S. states.

Citizens: CMC directly affects people in their role as citizens. Access to expanded quantities of political information, the ability to tailor that information to personal interests or needs, and the potential to initiate or join an online political discussion can empower the contemporary citizen in ways that were more difficult in a mass-mediated environment. By the U.S. election of 2012, the Pew Research Center reported that nearly half of all voters named the Internet as the primary source of campaign news – up from the 3 percent in 1996 mentioned at the start of this entry.

Citizen-information websites have helped pioneer the use of big data as a resource for empowerment. "Matching" features enable CMC users to compare their views on issues with the stated or published views of candidates or officeholders. Other tools make legislative decisions easy to retrieve and understand, or provide consumer-friendly translations of massive information databases. For example, OpenSecrets.org, an award-winning website from the Center for Responsive Politics, enables users to track the influence of money on U.S. politics.

Social media create alternative sources of civic information for and from citizens, who can bypass traditional gatekeepers both in nations with controlled information systems and those with a relatively free press. Recent uses of social media for political purposes in nations with a history of information control have included mobilization efforts in Yemen, Egypt, and other nations of the region that collectively became known as the "Arab Spring" uprisings; the large and growing use of "weibos," which combine features of Facebook and Twitter, among Chinese political activists as well as ordinary citizens; and the use of mobile social media technologies by opposition parties in Africa, where state control of the media traditionally made it difficult for alternative messages to reach the public. Pew research indicated that during the 2012 U.S. election season, nearly one-fifth of all adults posted

political content on a social networking site, a six-fold increase over 2008, and 12% followed or friended a candidate or other political figure.

Direct voting through the Internet remains in limited use. Trials in large democracies, including the United States and United Kingdom, and smaller ones, including Ireland and the Netherlands, were discontinued in the first decade of the century. However, online voting has been successful in Estonia and in regional elections in Switzerland, and it may be gaining ground elsewhere (Gasser & Trechsel, 2013).

A lingering concern, which has plagued political and civic applications since the inception of CMC, is the ongoing problem of a "digital divide." Although access to digital technologies has greatly expanded over the past two decades, it remains far from universal either within or between nations. Even among those with access, differentials remain in use of CMC for political purposes, and those differentials typically follow familiar socioeconomic status lines.

SEE ALSO: Advertising, Political; Digital Democracy; Digital Public Sphere; E-Government; Internet; Journalism, Political; Online Elections; Social Media

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