CHAPTER 2

THE CULTURE OF ANALYTICS IN 2014

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Following the success of the 2008 Obama campaign, both academic study and journalistic inquiry has devoted serious attention to the rise of digital communication within electoral campaigns. Increasingly, the use of analytics and data-driven strategy has been at the center of this interest. For example, the Obama “cave” has been both mythologized and studied deeply. Sasha Issenberg’s Victory Lab bore into the 2008 Obama campaign’s use of data, and updated its account following the 2012 race. The 2012 presidential campaign brought analytics-based get-out-the-vote (GOTV) efforts on both sides of the aisle. The Republicans’ Orca and Democrats’ Narwhal projects garnered attention both before and after Election Day, with many news outlets attributing their makers’ respective success and failure to the tools themselves, and the larger project of successfully executing a modern, data-driven campaign. But analytics-based campaigning is not as original an invention as these stories of digital pioneers would lead us to believe. Long before the rise of digital strategy, campaigns routinely tested the materials they produced. Employing a variety of methods, from focus groups to surveys to dial tests, campaigns test what issues are salient to voters, poll public opinion on a variety of topics, and test the use of specific language or phrases; all before the “official” message(s) went out, in order to produce the most persuasive ones possible. But with the rise of digital messaging came the availability of analytic data that could capture what citizens did with messages and provide a measurement for success that could be assessed in real time. As new platforms were adopted for campaign communication, new analytics regarding these behaviors became available—how many people visited particular pages on campaign websites and how long they stayed there, how often they opened e-mails, what links were clicked, whether they shared content within social media platforms, and so on. Although the testing of messages and targeting of potential voters has long been of concern for campaigns, the 2008 Obama campaign was the site of new, analytics-based strategies for doing so (Issenberg, 2012). In a reaction to the successes of the 2008 campaign, the 2010, 2012, and 2014 campaigns all occurred within calls to institute what many consultants called
a “culture of analytics” or a “culture of testing” that would involve a greater amount of testing as messages are circulated to the public. This effort would also expand to the local level, rather than just national campaigns, which would likely increase the success rates of persuasive and mobilizing messages.

While the benefits of analytics-based messaging have been widely extolled, the study of their deployment has largely occurred at the presidential level, and although the 2008 and 2012 presidential campaigns can provide insight into what’s happening in the most advanced of campaigns, findings from presidential elections tell us little about the more local practices that occur in midterm elections. As a result, this chapter will focus on the adoption of a culture of analytics at the congressional and state-wide level, tracing changes from its initial adoption in 2010 through 2014. Using data gained from interviews, professional training sessions, and digital strategy manuals, this chapter couples the perspectives of communications directors and staffers (as well as digital staffers) with those who have backed the development of a culture of analytics and trained staffers in such strategy, in order to compare the vision set forth for a culture of analytics with the on-the-ground reality of its implementation during the 2014 election cycle. Rather than merely detailing the spread of analytics-based communication strategies, this chapter will focus on how the use of analytics in messaging decision impacts the messages campaigns produce, as well as the goals and visions of communications offices.

In order to answer these questions, this chapter takes a qualitative approach that investigates the development of what has been called a culture of analytics over time, focusing particularly on its adoption from 2010 to 2014. As campaign practices evolve over time, this focus on their evolution contextualizes emerging strategies, and situates their emergence within a variety of actors—both technical and social—that mediate the processes of creating and circulating messages. This work draws on actor-network theory (Latour, 2005) to focus on both individual staffers and consultants, as well as the technologies they deploy, and emphasizes both the material aspects of analytic-driven campaigning as well as their patterns of use. We often think of campaigns as contingent due to the way they can be disrupted and swayed by international and domestic events, but they are also products of broader public discussions of tactics, politics and governance as well. Moreover, not only must campaigns be contextualized according to how they’ve evolved from campaigns that have come before, but also as direct products of intra- and inter-party infrastructure and investment (Kreiss, 2012). In line with calls for communication studies as a discipline to more deeply investigate the material aspects of communication technologies (Gillespie, Boczkowski, & Foot, 2014), this chapter also focuses on the affordances and interfaces of the analytics and testing tools campaigns use in order to highlight what metrics of success campaigns can gather data for, and, in turn, value.

This research therefore combines the investigation of professional training sessions and campaign manuals with reflections of actual campaign communication strategies and tactics. As a result it draws on data spanning from 2010–2012, including in-depth interviews of over 40 campaign consultants following the 2010 and 2012 campaigns, brief (approximately 20–30 minutes) interviews with an additional fifteen staffers and consultants—nine of whom were staffers in a single campaign.