

Victoria A. Farrar-Myers & Justin S. Vaughn (Eds.), **Controlling the Message: New Media in American Political Campaigns**, New York, NY: New York University Press, 2015, 368 pp., \$30.00 (paperback).

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The day I sat down to start writing this review, New Jersey Governor Chris Christie held a strange press conference. Two days prior, Christie had introduced Republican presidential hopeful Donald Trump and then stood behind the candidate he'd endorsed wearing what looked like the facial expression of a man slowly realizing he'd made an enormous mistake. People had some fun with this on the Internet, by (among other things) scoring video of Christie's hilarious expression with the comedic theme song from the TV show *Curb Your Enthusiasm*.

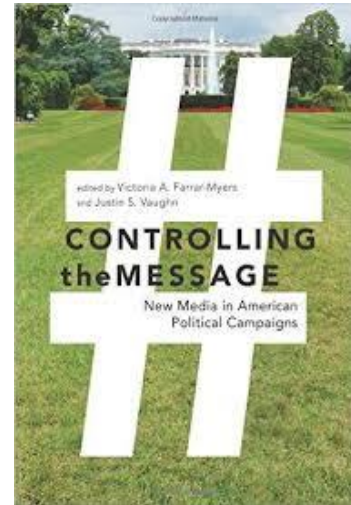


**Figure 1. Chris Christie's widely mocked expression at press conference. [Click here.](#)**

That video clip, and others like it, got linked, "liked," and retweeted enough that Christie felt compelled to call in the press corps and explain "I was not thinking, 'oh my God, what have I done'" (Livio, 2016). The writer Alex Pareene asked on Twitter if this was "the first press conference ever called by a sitting governor specifically to respond to memes" (2016).

All of which is to say that the time is clearly right for an exploration of how new and social media are affecting the American political system. In ***Controlling the Message: New Media in American Political Campaigns***, editors Victoria A. Farrar-Myers and Justin S. Vaughn take a clever approach to this task, presenting a collection of projects that were planned before the 2012 election season and researched in real time during the campaign so that the data are not altered by the biases of memory or hindsight. The chapters address a variety of aspects of new media's role in politics, ranging from how journalists use Twitter to how Facebook use affects candidate evaluations.

The volume circles around a few big questions. The title asks explicitly about who controls political messages; underneath that lies the question of what is *really* new or different now. Is learning about an election from Twitter meaningfully different from learning about it from CNN? And if there are differences, in what sense are they changing the nature of American democracy?



*Controlling the Message* is organized into four themed sections. The first section is about how political actors use new and social media to convey messages. The answer given by the authors of these chapters to the question "Are things *really* different now?" is something along the lines of "kinda." In chapter 1, Kreiss and Welch examine voter targeting efforts by the 2012 Obama campaign, and find that while new media offered the campaign new ways to control its message *and* new ways to lose control, in the end "campaigning [in 2012] was still premised on the old-fashioned attempts to generate interest, enthusiasm, and political desire" (p. 26). Gulati and Williams in chapter 2 look at congressional campaigns' motivations for social media adoption and hear a somewhat deflating story: Campaigns worry that they'll look amateurish if they *don't* get on social media, but many have little confidence that social media can actually help them win votes. Much of what campaigns do on social media ends up being uninspired, and the authors conclude that social media's "transformative potential for elections and democracy is not being realized to any great extent" (p. 49).

On the other hand, chapters 3 and 4 argue that new media have diminished the gatekeeping capacity of traditional media in a way that constitutes a meaningful change in political communication. Azari and Stewart show in chapter 3 how independent political actors can use social media to act as surrogates for campaigns they support, "sometimes saying what official campaigns cannot" (p. 66), or as competitors who advance their own preferred arguments. In chapter 4, Klotz finds that elite communicators encounter more competition from ordinary citizens on YouTube than they ever did on broadcast news, though they retain a significant advantage in messaging power. One leaves the section with a clear sense that new media have expanded the field of potent political actors, but not that anyone is acting profoundly differently.

In the second section of the book comes a collection of pieces that look at continuities and differences in traditional and online media. As the editors observe in the introduction, it is the continuities that stand out. Rather than change sourcing practices or objectivity norms, the effect of Twitter on campaign reporting has merely been to shift “established campaign-reporting routines into overdrive” (p. 107), Lawrence finds in interviews with journalists in chapter 5. Chapters 6 (Gruszczynski) and 7 (Eshbaugh-Soha) show that campaign coverage by new media does not differ in substantial ways from traditional media in terms of its focus on controversies, its volume, or its tone. There may be new players and equipment in campaign coverage, but the game remains largely the same.

Halfway through the volume, then, the reader gets the impression that *Controlling the Message* has uncovered only modest effects of new media on the 2012 campaign. But in the third section, as the chapters begin to interrogate the political consequences of social media use, this begins to change. In chapter 8, Hawthorne and Warner offer evidence that use of social media is related to users’ evaluation of candidates. In chapter 9, Conroy, Feezell, and Guerrero contend that Facebook use is causing notions of citizenship to evolve, so that the concept includes more active engagement. Chapter 10 (Belt) looks at the kinds of videos that garner audience attention online and argues that the online context reveals audience preferences that could change the nature of political communication. *Citizen* use of new media, it appears, is having some effect on the political landscape.

The final section, about the implications of new media for democracy, brings us back to ambiguity about the repercussions of new technologies. Discourse in Internet comment forums, those alleged cesspools, is surprisingly similar to mainstream political speech, finds Hoffman in chapter 11, though chapters 12 (Coffey, Kohler and Granger) and 13 (Calfano) suggest there are reasons to be concerned that incivility and “flaming and blaming” in comment sections do in fact have negative social effects—that new media “promote disagreement without providing [the] necessary mechanisms to find common agreement” (p. 264).

The editors pull all these pieces together in a helpful conclusion, in which they observe that campaign fundamentals are still campaign fundamentals, new media are tools to convey messages rather than messages themselves, and the effects of new media occur on the margins. But, they note, “many key political victories are earned at the margin” (p. 303). So new media, while perhaps not yet hugely transformative, can be hugely important. Finally, they suggest that if there is something fundamentally changing in American politics, it may be the focal point of our campaigns. They were once *party*-centered and then transitioned to being *candidate*-centered. Now that new media have brought us voter targeting, user control of content reception, and citizen production of information, we may be entering a *voter*-centered age.

*Controlling the Message* brings valuable data and sharp analysis to bear on timely, important questions. I want to suggest a couple of additional considerations to the editors’ conclusions about who controls messages and whether new media are changing democracy.

The Chris Christie meme I referenced above feels relevant to the question of who controls political messages not only because it compelled a sitting governor to respond to a guy with the handle

“nick pants,” but because it represents a new kind of message platform. A few years ago, no one would have recognized six seconds of video mashed up with a TV theme song, playing on loop, as a coherent form of communication. This platform is more amenable to some kinds of messages than others. New media are tools, but (as Farrar-Myers and Vaughn note) the tools set some parameters for the work. You don’t build an igloo with a blowtorch, and you don’t offer three caveats if you want to make a point on Vine.

As van Dijck (2013) observes, the characteristics of platforms are the result of strategic choices by platform owners working to shape human interactions. Platforms like Facebook and Twitter allow users more control than, say, NBC news, but user activities are still “programmed” (p. 6). *Controlling the Message* is primarily concerned with the balance of power among political elites, news media, and online users. Going forward, when we ask who controls political messages in the era of new media, we might also ask to what extent the companies that establish parameters for those messages are themselves political actors. After all, their decisions influence what kinds of candidates and messages can find success in the contemporary political environment.

As for the implications of new media for democracy, profound changes might not be immediately evident in the context of electoral campaigns in part because one of social media’s strengths is to lower the costs of coordination, making it easier for scattered groups to organize (Shirky, 2011)—but electoral campaigns were *already* organized. This is why it is noteworthy that the chapters in *Controlling the Message* that suggest the most meaningful change are the ones about *citizen* use of new media, and particularly Conroy, Feezell, and Guerrero’s take on evolving notions of citizenship. The pattern seems to support Shirky’s argument that “the potential of social media lies mainly in their support of civil society and the public sphere—change measured in years and decades rather than weeks or months” (2011, p. 30). Perhaps new media are affecting elections at the margins now, but over time, they promise (threaten?) to give us new norms of political discourse and practice. They may indeed eventually put the voter at the center of our campaigns, as Farrar-Myers and Vaughn propose, by changing the way individuals relate to politics. Or maybe the nick pants of the world will rise from the fray and run for Congress, on the strength of their devastating six-second attack ads. Either way, in the long run, big changes seem likely.

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