

Using the Internet to Mobilize Marginalized Groups: People With Disabilities and Digital Campaign Strategies in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election

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It is important to understand the implications of online election campaigning for groups that have been marginalized in politics. To this end, this article discusses a focus group study on digital campaigning in the 2016 U.S. presidential election with voters with a wide range of physical, mental, and communication disabilities. Digital campaigns can deepen or curtail opportunities for people with disabilities to be active citizens. Participants in this study had high expectations to learn about the candidates through new media platforms, particularly Google and YouTube. However, the 2016 campaigns seemed to struggle to understand Americans with disabilities as an emerging online constituency. This mismatch between demand and supply in online election communication is discussed with a view to illuminating the sociotechnical foundations of digital campaigning and its effect on political participation among citizens with disabilities. There are important opportunities for digital mobilization and inclusion here, but their realization is dependent on a cultural shift that values people with disabilities as full citizens.

Keywords: disability, Internet, inclusion, elections, campaigning

The Internet has supported fundamental changes to how election information is disseminated, accessed, and shared. Voters benefit from enhanced opportunities to identify and prioritize content based on their specific interests or grievances. At the same time, campaigns seek to capitalize on this appetite for personalized information using online channels to implement increasingly sophisticated outreach strategies. Recent campaigns have gone well beyond basic demographic criteria in their attempts to tailor online information to groups drawn around specific interests (Davidson & Binstock, 2011). As part of this trend, online media offer opportunities for campaigns to reach and potentially mobilize groups that have been neglected and that, more generally, have been marginalized in democratic politics.

One of these groups is people with disabilities. Nearly 20% of the U.S. population—56.7 million people—has one or more physical, mental, or communication disabilities (Brault, 2012). Americans with

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disabilities have increasingly embraced digital and social media in recent years, and a majority now regularly uses the Internet (Anderson & Perrin, 2017). This has generated opportunities for innovative online engagement initiatives directed at Internet users with disabilities, which U.S. presidential candidates—particularly Democrats—have started to embrace since 2008.

Clearly, this trend is likely to have important implications for political participation among people with disabilities, which is a fundamental right enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Article 29) but one that has been curbed by exclusionary barriers. Political participation is an ongoing process that starts well before polling day and is indissolubly tied to the right to access relevant information and express oneself freely, which is also included in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Article 21) but remains problematic for people with disabilities. Information and communication technologies have tended to play an ambivalent role in political processes for people with disabilities; they can “facilitate unprecedented access to political life” but at the same time “pose insurmountable barriers if they are not designed in an accessible way” (Lord, 2017, p. 40). This ambivalence directly influences the enfranchisement of people with disabilities and affects their ability to be active citizens, participate effectively in public debates, and make informed decisions about key political issues and candidates.

Digital campaign strategies are bound to have an impact on the ability of people with disabilities to be informed and active citizens. On the one hand, targeted online outreach efforts may enable citizens with disabilities to understand and potentially engage with a campaign in novel and meaningful ways. On the other hand, however, misguided campaign strategies might also generate additional exclusion for people with disabilities. To better understand the effects of the shift to digital campaigning on the political citizenship of people with disabilities, it is essential to explore these people’s experiences with these new outreach efforts.

The literature on the inclusion of people with disabilities in elections focuses primarily on voter turnout and the accessibility of registration and polling processes (Schur, Kruse & Blanck, 2013). More broadly, research on online voter segmentation and outreach strategies explores mainly the supply side of campaigns (see, e.g., Conley, 2017; Stier, Bleier, Lietz, & Strohmaier, 2018). In contrast, this article illuminates the demand side of current digital election campaigns that are targeted toward people with disabilities. Demand and supply are compared in order to determine whether digital electioneering is enabling people with disabilities to participate in democratic election as informed citizens. This comparison sheds light on the complex interrelation among information and communication technologies, disability, and campaign cultures.

This study reviews focus group data from people with a range of disabilities in discussions about the 2016 U.S. presidential election. The research provides an original citizen perspective on the targeted online outreach efforts of election campaigns and discusses their potential to better inform or further marginalize people with disabilities. Crucially, this research identifies some important gaps between what people with disabilities expect and hope for from election campaigns and what the 2016 digital election campaigns provided to them. In particular, participants criticized both the formats and messages associated with disability-related online campaign materials—especially those of the Clinton campaign, whose bespoke

strategy to reach voters with disabilities appeared to be hindered by a lack of appropriate understanding of this voter group's technology needs and preferences.

The article concludes by discussing the reasons for this mismatch between demand and supply in digital campaigning. Highlighted are two distinct but interrelated factors that portray digital disability election information as a complex sociotechnical system that results from the interaction of changing technologies and approaches to disability. First, in digital electioneering there is a need for an expanded understanding of accessibility that goes beyond technical standards and carefully considers how the ways that information is packaged interacts with the media needs, preferences, and habits of voters and potential voters with disabilities. A second factor is the influence of the structure and culture of campaign organizations on their ability to mobilize people with disabilities, which to be successful ought to value these people as important constituents and involve them meaningfully in the design of digital outreach and engagement strategies.

People With Disabilities as an Online Constituency

Approximately 35.4 million Americans with disabilities are eligible to vote, representing close to one-sixth of the national electorate (Schur & Kruse, 2016). For comparison, Black and Latino voters, two groups that election campaigns have targeted heavily in recent years, total about 27.4 million and 27.3 million, respectively (Krogstad, 2016). The sheer number of voters with disabilities suggests that it would be beneficial for campaigns to engage effectively with this group, particularly in close elections when a few votes can determine the final outcome. Also, on average, U.S. voters with disabilities showed a higher level of interest in the 2016 election than those without disabilities (Igielnik, 2016), which characterizes this group as a potentially "aware" public (Aldoory & Grunig, 2012) and makes it a valuable constituency.

While campaigns may be tempted to write off voters with disabilities due to challenges in reaching them effectively and the fact that they have turned out in lower numbers than nondisabled people (Schur et al., 2013), in recent election cycles candidates started to experiment with opportunities to connect with this group online. The first U.S. presidential candidate to experiment in this area was Barack Obama. Both in 2008 and 2012, the Obama campaign created groups for "Citizens With Disabilities for Obama" on its Web portal. These group pages provided campaign information with specific relevance for voters with disabilities, showcased the stories of Obama supporters with disabilities, and invited other people with disabilities to join the effort. Other identity- and interest-based groups that the Obama campaign targeted and mobilized in a similar way included women, African Americans, environmentalists, and LGBTQ+ people. The inclusion of people with disabilities among these groups is significant.

This strategy echoes Grunig's (1997) situational theory of publics, which asserts that organizations have an interest in identifying and communicating with people who have a stake in certain issues or processes, bringing them awareness, and ultimately activating them to the organization's advantage. Although the disability community is a very diverse group that cuts across all types of disabilities, races, genders, and backgrounds, several shared interests and experiences create a distinct cultural identity that characterizes voters with disabilities as a political body (Guldvik & Lesjø, 2014) and potentially facilitates its activation as an election public (Sha, 2006).

This change of approach from election campaigns raises the issue of what implications these new online outreach strategies have for people with disabilities. In particular, it is important to ask whether digital election campaigns make it easier or more difficult for people with disabilities to be better informed. The lack of accessible or relevant information has been noted by election observers as a key source of political marginalization for people with disabilities (International Foundation for Electoral Systems, 2014, p. 39).

Obviously, campaigns are just one of the sources that people with disabilities turn to for information about elections; other sources include traditional news media, disability organizations, and alternative disability news outlets. Barriers and opportunities are present across this range of sources. For example, the digitization of television and its hybridization with streaming services has not always guaranteed accessibility (Ellis, 2014; Ellis & Kent, 2015). Thus, researchers who plan to investigate these issues should be attuned to this broader and constantly evolving media ecology. Yet, online campaign communications constitute a particularly important player in this area because of their growing ability to shape the election agenda, particularly in the United States (Faris et al., 2017). At this point, it is unclear whether campaigns' attempts to reach people with disabilities online are helping to remove some exclusionary barriers or, instead, are erecting new ones. The answer to this question lies in the multifaceted interrelation among technology, disability, and campaign strategy.

Disability, the Internet, and Campaign Strategy

Much of the early literature on disability and the Internet focuses on how access and accessibility issues reproduce or even exacerbate online disablement and exclusion for people with disabilities (Goggin & Newell, 2003). More recently, the scope of this research has broadened to explore in depth the experiences of people with disabilities who use the Internet every day despite persisting accessibility problems. The findings that emerge from this work are mixed. The number of Americans with disabilities who regularly go online increased from just over 50% in 2011 (Fox, 2012) to 61% in 2017, with 70% of those ages 18 to 64 owning a smartphone and over two-thirds in the same age group using broadband (Anderson & Perrin, 2017). Some online activities seem to be especially relevant to Internet users with disabilities: they are more likely than users without disabilities to download and stream video, share content they produce, and post to blogs (Dobransky & Hargittai, 2016, p. 27). However, a substantial gap continues to exist in Internet use among Americans with and without disabilities, with Internet penetration among the latter substantially higher, at over 80% (Anderson & Perrin, 2017; File & Ryan, 2014).

It is useful to note some recent developments in political participation online. Although Internet use among people with disabilities is skewed toward younger generations, who also tend to be more interested in politics (Schur, Shields, & Schriener, 2005), in the mid-2000s people with disabilities were less likely than nondisabled people to join a political group online or say that the Internet affected their own political activity (Schur & Adya, 2013, pp. 819–829). In addition, until not long ago disability advocacy organizations tended to regard the Internet as a space that had little relevance for them, mainly due to access and accessibility problems (Trevisan, 2014). However, digital disability activism has since exploded in the wake of controversial policy debates and political crises in countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia (Ellis & Goggin, 2018; Mann, 2018; Trevisan, 2017a, 2017b). In the United States, disability activists such as

Alice Wong, Gregg Beratan, and Andrew Pulrang launched the hashtag campaign “#CripTheVote” during the 2016 election to increase the visibility of disability issues. After the election, other self-advocates organized an unprecedented digital disability protest as part of the 2017 Women’s March on Washington (Trevisan, 2018).

These are positive developments. However, their impact and the effects of the digitalization of politics on most people with disabilities has yet to be understood fully. The question is whether these advancements remain confined to a politically savvy and connected minority or benefit people with disabilities more broadly. This issue is reflected in broader discussions on the digitalization of politics. A popular paradigm in the study of online politics has been that it entrenches the existing power differential between those who are already involved in politics on one side and disenfranchised people on the other. However, recent work challenges this assertion by showing that social media can in fact expand participation, particularly among young people (Xenos, Vromen, & Loader, 2014). When they are provided with the technology that serves their needs, marginalized people can embrace online civic and political participation enthusiastically and benefit from it (Hampton, 2010). The fundamental caveats here are whether people are provided with the appropriate technology and information to meet their needs and preferences, and offered meaningful opportunities to become involved in issues that matter to them.

Election campaigns play an important role in this process as they decide how to reach out to people with disabilities online. People with disabilities are a group that is relevant to candidates from any party. Despite a widespread belief that people with disabilities vote Democrat, political ideology and party identification trends among Americans with disabilities are similar to those for nondisabled Americans, with voters with disabilities more or less evenly split between the Democratic and Republican Parties (Schur & Adya, 2013). This creates an incentive for all campaigns to try to connect with people with disabilities online.

To use a business analogy, politicians have a vested interest in establishing effective online communications with people with disabilities for the same reason it makes sense for technology companies to implement universal design principles: it increases their customer base (Goggin & Newell, 2007). Yet, as Goggin and Newell note, “change is slow” (p. 160) as truly inclusive platforms and channels can be created only by eliminating “the exclusionary power relations and technologies that require inclusion in the first place” (p. 166). This situation is further complicated for election campaigns by the fact that “social media increasingly delivers a feast of different options, with a troubling array of commitment to accessibility” (Ellis & Kent, 2015, pp. 5–6). Thus, the creation of opportunities for people with disabilities to become better informed and potentially mobilized depends largely on whether campaigns understand and correctly interpret their technological needs and preferences. Therefore, it is essential to explore this issue from the citizen perspective to understand whether the supply of digital communication from campaigns effectively meets the demand from people with disabilities.

Method

Equal opportunities to acquire and consume, produce, share, and discuss information freely are key prerequisites for effective political participation. This study explores these issues by focusing on information acquisition. In particular, two complementary issues are investigated. First, the perspectives of people with disabilities on different online platforms are considered with a view to determine which, if any,

voters with disabilities find most valuable in elections and why. Second, the study builds on this information to assess whether the 2016 U.S. presidential campaigns designed and disseminated online disability-specific content that matched the expectations of people with disabilities. The perspective of people with disabilities on both the format and content of online campaign messages is examined.

A simple accessibility audit of online campaign materials would not be sufficient to answer these questions. Although accessibility is essential to persons with disabilities, it is only the starting point for engaging with this group effectively. It is also important to explore whether campaigns craft messages that not only resonate with this group but can be readily shared and remediated, if appropriate. Focus groups with voters with disabilities were carried out to explore these processes and provide a citizen-centric perspective. This approach fulfills two main aims. First, it provides the first in-depth analysis of people with disabilities as an online election public. Second, it offers useful insights on digital campaigns' understanding of and approach to the disability community. In particular, the relationship between the demand and supply of online campaign information is examined with a view to illuminating the sociotechnical factors that are responsible for any progress or setbacks in disability election inclusion.

A focus group guide was developed around key issues while also providing opportunities for participants to introduce new topics. Questions focused on technological preferences and online election information-seeking behavior among people with disabilities as well as on experiences and perceptions of digital campaign outreach efforts toward the disability community. Conversations focused mainly on the 2016 general election, with some participants making occasional references to the primary season.

Focus Group Participants

Eight focus groups were carried out with a total of 43 voters with a broad range of disabilities between November 2016 and April 2017. The author has considerable experience conducting qualitative research with persons with disabilities and moderated all the groups with support from graduate students. Focus groups were held at disabled people's organizations (DPOs) and centers for independent living (CILs) in the Washington, DC-Baltimore region.² Participants received a small incentive (shopping card) for their time and involvement in the study.

Participant recruitment was informed by a pan-disability approach for two main reasons. First, the diversity and complexity of the disability community make it premature to focus only on certain subgroups or types of disabilities in this initial study. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (Taylor, 2014, p. 10), 46.3% of Americans with disabilities have disabilities in two or more domains (communicative, mental, physical). This is reflected in the focus groups, where nearly half ($n = 18$) of the participants indicated that they had multiple disabilities. It was beneficial to take a broad approach in recruitment while also noting in the analysis any perspectives or experiences from participants with specific disabilities. Second, a pan-disability approach is consistent with the understanding of people with disabilities as a group with a distinct cultural identity and the

² Organizations that assisted with focus groups include Accessible Resources for Independence, the American Association of People With Disabilities, Columbia Lighthouse for the Blind, Gallaudet University, the National Council on Independent Living, RespectAbility, the IMAGE Center, and United Cerebral Palsy.

strategic objective of campaigns to reach and mobilize the largest number of people in any one constituency. The most prevalent types of impairments among participants included mobility problems (29%), blindness and vision impairments (29%), deafness and hearing problems (20%), mental health and psychiatric problems (20%), complex degenerative conditions (15%), learning disabilities (13%), and autism (9%). This distribution broadly mirrors the U.S. disability community, where the most common disability domain is physical, followed by mental and communication (Taylor, 2014, p. 11).

Working together with DPOs and CILs, a diverse set of participants was recruited for each focus group. DPOs and CILs publicized the study on their premises and circulated calls for volunteers to their supporters and service-users' lists. DPO and CIL staff were able to advise on participant selection from volunteer pools, but the final decision was made by the researchers to mitigate organization-related bias. It should be noted that participants, due to their association with DPOs and CILs, were likely to be more engaged in disability issues than the average American with disabilities. At the same time, however, this engagement facilitated more active participation in focus group discussions.

Participants completed a short questionnaire about key demographics, whether they voted in 2016, their level of interest in politics, Internet access, and social media use. Although more Democratic Party supporters were involved in this study, owing both to the area in which focus groups were conducted and the pool of people who volunteered to take part, all the groups included one or more Republican Party supporters. This is a potential limitation of this study and was accounted for in the analysis. That said, Democrats were particularly relevant to this study given the need to evaluate the efforts of the Hillary Clinton campaign to target the disability community. Such efforts were not mirrored by the Trump campaign, as discussed later in this article. Participants were between 21 and 78 years old, with an average age of 41. In terms of gender, 56% ($n = 24$) identified as female, 40% ($n = 17$) as male, 2% ($n = 1$) as transgender, and 2% ($n = 1$) as nonbinary. Focus group participants were 49% ($n = 21$) White, 42% ($n = 18$) Black, 4.5% ($n = 2$) Latino, and 4.5% ($n = 2$) mixed race. Among the groups, 80% ($n = 34$) of participants had voted in 2016, 14% ($n = 6$) had not voted, and the remainder chose not to say.

About 90% ($n = 38$) of participants said they were regular Internet users, with three-quarters ($n = 32$) who used at least one social media site daily. Among social media sites, Facebook was the most widely used by over 70% ($n = 31$) of participants, followed by YouTube ($n = 22$), Twitter ($n = 15$), and Instagram ($n = 13$). It is important to note that about 20% ($n = 9$) of the participants said that they did not use social media at all. All but one of these participants ($n = 8$) were blind or vision-impaired—a first indication that blind and vision-impaired people may be at a disadvantage with digital campaigns.

Focus groups were video-recorded, transcribed, and imported into NVivo 11 for thematic coding. Coding categories were developed both deductively—using the focus group guide and moderator/observer notes—and inductively from a close reading of a sample of transcripts. Following piloting, the transcripts were coded independently by a team of three researchers. Codes and contradictory cases were discussed with the aid of field notes until a consensus was reached.

Disability in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election

Before discussing focus group results, it is useful to review briefly why the 2016 U.S. presidential election constitutes an important case study. A series of events generated unparalleled levels of visibility for disability issues during a U.S. election cycle. In November 2015, Donald Trump mocked a reporter with a disability during a campaign rally (Kessler, 2016). This episode was shared virally online and generated a considerable amount of news coverage, putting disability in the spotlight. As mentioned above, a significant effort was undertaken by activists to use social media to increase the visibility of disability issues through a Twitter campaign called “#CripTheVote,” which was flanked by more established online voter registration initiatives such as the American Association of People With Disabilities’ “Rev Up!” campaign. Although this article is not the place for a detailed examination of online grassroots initiatives, it is useful to note that “#CripTheVote” gained substantial traction on Twitter.

The Clinton campaign tried to capitalize on these trends through several concerted efforts to connect with and mobilize the disability community. Disability-related initiatives were given prominence in the campaign cycle. The Clinton campaign also developed a large amount of disability-specific Web content. At the center of this strategy was the campaign’s website, which included specific pages on disability rights, the Americans With Disabilities Act, mental health, autism, Alzheimer’s disease, disabled veterans, and support for people who care for disabled and ill family members. Each of these topics was also featured on the campaign’s partner website “The Briefing,” which illustrated Clinton’s policy agenda in detail and was laid out in a style similar to that of a news site (see Figure 1).

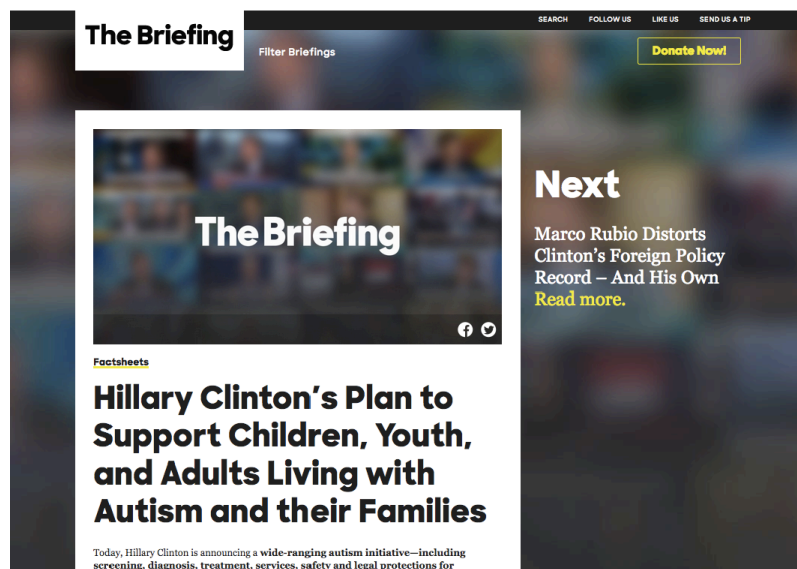


Figure 1. Autism policy fact sheet on Hillary Clinton’s “The Briefing” website.

Disability was also at the center of some major Clinton campaign events. Disability rights advocate Anastasia Somoza was a prominent speaker at the Democratic National Convention in July 2016. Less than two months before election day, Clinton gave a major speech in which she outlined her vision for disability policy. This was unprecedented for a presidential candidate, and some news media described Clinton as “pushing intensively to win over . . . disabled people and their families” (Wagner & Phillips, 2016, para. 1), suggesting that her campaign had clearly identified the U.S. disability community as a relevant audience and potentially supportive group.

In contrast, the Trump campaign did not appear to target Americans with disabilities in any specific way. Despite the controversial episode mentioned above, the Trump campaign did not develop a disability-specific message, and its website did not highlight disability-related content. None of the pages that intuitively could have included this type of content, such as those on health care and veterans affairs, explicitly mentioned disabilities. Although it could be argued that this approach was in line with a campaign that overall included little policy detail, it also suggests that the Trump campaign had not identified the U.S. disability community as a key constituency. This seems shortsighted given the large percentage of Americans with disabilities who identify with conservative ideals and tend to vote Republican (Schur & Adya, 2013).

Findings

The Desire for Information Control: Google and YouTube

Focus group participants talked extensively about how they kept up with the election. As expected from individuals involved in DPOs and CILs, participants were fairly interested in politics (the average self-reported score for interest in politics was 7.1 out of 10 in pre-focus group questionnaires). Indeed, most participants, particularly older ones, said that traditional news outlets—especially cable channels such as CNN and Fox, and radio for blind and low-vision participants—continued to be essential sources information. Yet every group also agreed nearly unanimously that the Internet played a fundamental role in their ability to stay up to date with the election. This reflects the varied media diet mentioned above and underscores the importance of continuing to advocate for fully accessible information channels across the board, including new, traditional, and hybrid ones.

Participants praised online media for granting users with disabilities more control over content than traditional media, especially television. This constituted a major theme in all the focus groups. About half ($n = 20$) of participants brought it up spontaneously in comments that opened up substantive group discussions. On one hand, the perception of control gave voters with disabilities who regularly used the Internet a sense of empowerment. On the other hand, the relatively few participants who were unable to go online (11%) felt that they had missed out on good opportunities to know more about the election. Most of these participants were older and blind or low-vision, and expressed a strong desire to overcome affordability and IT skills issues to become better informed and more engaged in politics.

Two types of control over online information were discussed. First, participants said that they enjoyed having more direct control over which content they engaged with. This included both the ability to restrict information flows and focus on certain content and the ability to identify specific information that otherwise

would have been “hidden” within broader campaign communications. Participants highlighted search engines as the main technology that enabled them to exercise this type of control, remarking that these tools had special significance for voters with disabilities. Nearly a third ($n = 13$) of participants talked specifically about Google search and Google News. For example, as one young woman described:

[Through Google] I could focus on issues that really mattered to me. And that kind of plays into what I like as a person with a disability using the Internet . . . if I wanted to find out . . . if [Libertarian candidate for president] Gary Johnson said anything regarding people with disabilities . . . I can type that into Google and find that information. (Emily, age 31)

Participants were eager to engage with disability-specific information online, which indirectly supports Clinton’s strategy to invest in the creation of disability-related content. At the same time, however, the use of Google to retrieve this content also suggests that this may not have been as easily identifiable or accessible as intended on digital campaign platforms.

The second type of control mentioned by participants was the ability to select information in more accessible formats and engage with it at one’s own pace. While this was expected to be a key concern for voters with a broad spectrum of accessibility needs, the online platform that was mentioned most frequently in conjunction with this theme was YouTube, which was perhaps less obvious. Half the participants who regularly used the Internet said that YouTube played a very important role in how they kept up with election news, making it the platform that received the most positive reviews in this study.

Albeit imperfect, YouTube’s accessibility features such as automated captioning have become an important space for disability activism and have “had a significant impact on the accessibility turn in broadband technologies” (Ellis, 2010, p. 21.9). Crucially, YouTube affords people with disabilities opportunities to remedy the lack of accessibility in content disseminated through various media—particularly television—through do-it-yourself interventions.

One feature of YouTube that was mentioned multiple times in focus groups was its usefulness for watching televised presidential debates. TV debates are key moments in U.S. campaigns but “all too often are inaccessible to deaf viewers” (Lord, 2017, p. 39) and to people with a range of communication and mental disabilities. Most participants said that it was very difficult or altogether impossible for them to follow the 2016 presidential debates on live television due to several issues, including problems with captions (both with syncing and typing errors), lack of sign language interpretation, the fast-paced nature of the debates, and the amount of content compressed in a short time frame. One in three participants said they addressed these issues by supplementing TV viewing with, or entirely switching to, YouTube to watch the debates. For example, one participant with language-processing issues said that, for people like her:

The debates [on live TV] are not digestible. . . . So I won’t watch a debate. Like, I’ll watch it, but then I’ll watch a recap video done by somebody on YouTube, because . . . as somebody with processing issues, when people are—when three people are talking at once, I feel like a ping-pong ball. (Francesca, age 26)

Even when accessibility was taken into consideration for key campaign events such as party conventions, participants noted that this offered no guarantee that in-person accessibility measures would lead to accessible broadcasts. For example, one Deaf participant explained that, "To see the [sign language] interpreters [who were] there at the [Democratic] convention was too hard [on TV]" (Ann, age 57).

YouTube enabled users with disabilities to step in and provide a valuable alternative when campaigns and traditional news outlets failed to produce content that catered to their needs effectively. For example, YouTube-based sign language and closed-captioned news services such as the *Daily Moth* and *iDeaf News* were instrumental in remedying this shortcoming for people who are deaf and hard of hearing.

Format Limitations and Control Curtailed on Campaign Websites

Focus group participants also talked about whether they thought campaigns incorporated their needs and expectations effectively in digital communications. This conversation focused on both the format and the content of the online campaign messages developed specifically to appeal to the disability community. Much of this discussion focused on the Clinton campaign, given that it had developed a substantial amount of disability-specific content, particularly compared with the Trump campaign.

Although in general participants agreed that campaigns did not pay as much attention to the disability community as they did to other groups, every focus group also spontaneously acknowledged the work of the Clinton campaign in this area. Talking specifically about Clinton's website, one participant explained that Clinton's "platform [on disability issues] was excellent. . . . She really—or whoever worked with her, whoever was like, the point person on disabilities—you could tell that they really researched it" (Sylvia, age 52). However, the same participant also went on to criticize the format in which disability information was delivered on Clinton's website, because "it was only her [Clinton's] written platform. . . . [Instead,] they should've dispersed her ideas and [made them] easily digestible" (Sylvia, age 52).

Several other participants who actively sought to engage with disability-related content on the Clinton campaign's main website and its partner website "The Briefing" echoed this comment. These two websites were technically accessible. However, participants stressed that the pages dedicated to disability issues relied almost exclusively on long written paragraphs to convey Clinton's message. For example, the campaign website's page about the Americans With Disabilities Act simply reported the remarks Clinton gave on the 25th anniversary of this landmark legislation in 2015. Similarly, Clinton's agenda on mental health was illustrated on "The Briefing" with a strikingly long 5,262-word text document. Virtually all the other disability-specific pages followed the same pattern. These pages also did not link to disability content on the campaign's YouTube channel, where, incidentally, a search for "disability" returned only Clinton's major speech on disability, which was posted as a single 30-minute video, and one campaign advertisement on mental health. Therefore, disabled voters had no option to choose the format that best suited their needs and preferences. As one participant noted:

Having that [information] in audio format or being able to like have a condensed version or visual option . . . would have made understanding where they [the candidates] stand on their issues much more accessible, instead of my only option would be to read everything on the page. It would be nice. Which format do you want? And you can pick which one you want. That works best. (Mark, age 32)

Disability-Specific Content Bypassed Voters With Disabilities

Focus group participants also discussed the messages that campaigns sought to communicate. Most participants felt strongly about this topic, which generated the second highest number of comments after technology preferences. Again, the discussion focused primarily on the Clinton campaign and its attempt to reach voters with disabilities. Participants noted two important reasons why they thought that the disability-specific content in Clinton's digital campaign did not resonate as effectively with people with disabilities as it could have.

First, there was broad consensus that this content was directed primarily toward family members and friends of people with disabilities, not people with disabilities themselves. As one participant explained:

It was more so if they were targeting . . . family members [of people with disabilities]. I'm remembering one [YouTube video] ad in particular where it was a family of a young girl with some kind of disability, and . . . I'm not sure it addressed people directly with disabilities. (Mary, age 33)

This gave participants the impression that, although campaigns considered disability to be an important issue, they did not regard people with disabilities themselves as a key constituency in the same way as other groups.

One participant drew on her direct experience to illustrate this. She explained:

They're [the Clinton campaign] reaching out to me as a woman voter, as a middle-class voter, as a member of the LGBT community voter. It was like, all those things were covered, and it's just like . . . disability, as usual, unless it's about veterans, falls by the wayside. (Emily, age 31)

Scott, a participant who had worked on Capitol Hill for some time, said that most candidates make the decision whether to target voters with disabilities as a distinct constituency on the basis of flawed assumptions. He stated:

One, they [politicians] don't think we [people with disabilities] vote. Two, they don't understand who we are . . . and what our issues are. And three, . . . they're confused that they think that people with disabilities are more partisanly disposed to support Democrats. (Scott, age 38)

Second, participants stressed that disability-specific online campaign content failed to resonate with them because it did not adequately recognize and incorporate the diversity of the disability community. This diversity can refer to the intersection with other identities such as those based on gender, sexual orientation, and race as well as diversity of disability types. In summing up this point, one participant said that campaigns “don’t talk about, like, young people with disabilities, women with disabilities. . . . [Instead,] they talk about as if we are, like, this monolith bloc that you can cut off from everything else. And that’s just not how it works” (Francesca, age 26). Formulating better ways to incorporate intersectionality in disability-related online content would be an important step toward developing more effective communication strategies to reach voters with disabilities online.

Taken together, these comments suggest that participants perceived the Clinton campaign’s disability-specific Web content to reflect an external perspective on disability rather than the actual concerns and lived experiences of this group. Due to these issues, and despite efforts to engage with disability themes, participants felt that the Clinton campaign’s digital content struggled to activate the disability community.

Discussion and Conclusion

This article presents evidence from a study about the experiences of voters with disabilities with digital election campaigns. Participants expressed a strong desire to use online platforms, particularly search engines and video-sharing sites, to exert more control over election information and engage with more relevant campaign content. Yet they felt that the 2016 digital campaigns fell short of these expectations despite specific attempts by the Clinton campaign to mobilize voters with disabilities. It is useful to reflect here on the reasons behind this mismatch between demand and supply in digital campaign communication, which suggests that the potential of information and communication technologies to redefine political participation for people with disabilities depends not only on accessibility but also on the development of a culture within campaign organizations that regards people with disabilities as full citizens and constituents in their own right.

Demand for Online Information and Engagement Potential

Various online sources—including self-produced content on platforms such as YouTube—played an important role in enabling participants to stay informed about the 2016 election. Participants pointed out that it was beneficial for people with disabilities to access election information online to remedy some of the shortcomings of traditional forms of media, particularly television. Notably, this opinion was also shared by nonusers—mostly older and blind or vision-impaired people—who mentioned the desire to become connected and acquire better IT skills to enhance their ability to participate in elections. Participants found Google and YouTube especially useful. These two platforms, participants noted, enabled them to identify disability-related content that official campaign websites and news media outlets had not signposted effectively. YouTube was also highlighted for enabling voters with disabilities and Deaf voters to engage more meaningfully with key election events, including the presidential debates, in more accessible ways than TV.

These results characterize people with disabilities as a constituency with distinct digital communication preferences that go beyond technical accessibility standards and are driven by the desire to satisfy specific information needs. The fact that participants demonstrated an interest in searching for disability-specific information signals an important opportunity for campaigns to invest in search engine optimization for disability topics and develop accessible audiovisual content. Campaigns that are able to populate these spaces with disability-specific content before others could benefit from a relative first-mover advantage among a group that has demonstrated a notable interest in politics and elections. While this study is limited to people with disabilities, it would be interesting to explore whether a similar appetite for specialized online information and information-seeking patterns are shared by other marginalized groups. If this holds true, it would create opportunities for campaigns to raise their profile among these unconventional constituencies by meeting them where they are online.

Cultures of Disability in Digital Election Campaigning

In light of these findings, the 2016 Clinton campaign's decision to develop specific disability-related online content put it in a position to potentially reach and mobilize voters with disabilities. Yet, despite the intuition and ambition behind this plan, this strategy was hindered by the misalignment between its platform and format choices on one side and the preferences of voters with disabilities as expressed in this focus group study on the other. Clinton's effort was centered on the campaign website and partner website "The Briefing," where virtually all the disability-related content was limited to long-form text. This content was thoroughly researched from a policy perspective, but it was presented in a way that was out of step with the technological preferences of voters with disabilities as expressed by focus group participants, who were interested in these topics but found the format limiting.

This disconnect between ideas and execution suggests deeper underlying factors that determine whether technology can reconfigure participation in democratic elections for citizens with disabilities. One of these factors reflects a simplistic understanding of the relationship between disability and technology in election campaigns. A second factor relates more closely to a culture that struggles to approach people with disabilities as an election constituency in their own right.

First, the Clinton campaign appeared to have fallen for the common but misleading assumption that applying the accessibility standards set forth in relevant legislation and World Wide Web Consortium guidelines is sufficient to unlock the potential of information and communication technologies to inform Internet users with disabilities. Indeed, from a technical standpoint, Clinton's web pages on disability issues were accessible. Yet voters with disabilities found the information on those pages both challenging to navigate and difficult to engage with. The data collected for this study reveal that there is more to this process, which at a minimum requires an understanding of communication and technological preferences as well as the development of truly relevant and relatable content for the disability community.

One useful example here is that of campaign videos, to which the Clinton campaign started to add typed-in captions after realizing that auto-generated captions in YouTube can include many errors (Trout, 2016). This made the videos accessible to Deaf and hard-of-hearing people. However, the effort was not accompanied by a broader strategy to invest in more dedicated video content to reach the disability

community specifically. This reflected an approach based primarily on compliance, which is necessary but not sufficient to connect effectively with people with disabilities. It is essential to diversify the formats in which information is offered. Visual summaries such as infographics and captioned videos, information in audio and sign language formats, and documents in plain English were the alternative online formats mentioned most frequently by participants.

Second, the Clinton campaign's approach raises the issue of the organizational structure and culture that informed these choices. While this is not the place for a detailed discussion of decision-making structures in election campaigns, it is worth noting that the Clinton campaign tended to concentrate key decisions about online strategy in a small number of top people and involved external experts in the delivery, but less so in the planning, of digital outreach strategies (Kreiss & McGregor, 2018). Among other problems, this approach ultimately appeared to hinder the ability of this campaign to connect effectively with Internet users with disabilities. The Clinton campaign worked with several capable disability advisors at various points during 2016, including two of the architects of the Americans With Disabilities Act—former senator Tom Harkin and former representative Tony Coelho—as well as advocates such as Anastasia Somoza, Ted Jackson (disability outreach director at the Democratic National Committee), and a range of disability organizations. It seems that their advice informed the campaign's disability policy and was geared toward crafting key media moments, such as the Democratic Convention and Clinton's major speech on disability policy in September 2016, but without a specific focus on online strategy. Future campaigns should continue to involve people with disabilities as experts in their planning (Jackson, 2017; National Council on Independent Living, 2018), and input should be sought specifically about online outreach.

In conclusion, it could be argued that the mismatch between demand and supply in the Clinton campaign's digital outreach strategy toward people with disabilities demonstrated an underlying difficulty to acknowledge and approach this group as a constituency in their own right. This was evidenced also by the fact that those interviewed for this study thought that Clinton's online message on disability tended to reflect the perspective of family and friends instead of addressing people with disabilities directly. This echoes a popular but misplaced assumption that family and friends, and not people with disabilities, constitute the primary election constituency in the disability community. Instead, both the evidence collected for this study and recent survey research (Igielnik, 2016) demonstrate that people with disabilities are interested in politics and eager to become more involved.

Overall, the perspectives and experiences of citizens with disabilities with digital election campaigns analyzed in this study suggest that technology and accessibility are only one part of the picture. "Plugging" accessibility into existing processes is not sufficient, because it puts accessibility "beyond the domain of the social" (Goggin & Newell, 2007, p. 162). Instead, the effectiveness of digital campaign platforms and practices against long-standing patterns of political marginalization is tied to the development of an organizational culture that recognizes people with disabilities as equal citizens and values them as constituents with specific technological and communication needs that should be listened to and catered for accordingly. Until this cultural shift is complete, digital election campaigns are likely to struggle to mobilize Internet users with disabilities and, in turn, boost their stakes in democratic citizenship.

Limitations and Future Research

Because this is the first study on people with disabilities and digital election campaigns, it has some limitations that should be acknowledged to help identify the next research priorities in this area. In addition to the usual caveats in qualitative research with purposively selected participants, this work focused on an unusual election cycle. The salience of disability issues was boosted by the vast amount of news coverage dedicated to Trump's controversial impression of a reporter with a disability. Given that campaign events with a negative valence (Arendt & Fawzi, 2018)—particularly gaffes (Trevisan, Hoskins, Oates, & Mahlouly, 2018)—have been shown to generate intense online activity, the findings discussed here ought to be understood within this particular context, and future work should consider how different circumstances affect the approach of election campaigns to the disability community.

Furthermore, the ways that people with disabilities experience elections are not limited to digital campaign communications. The broader and increasingly hybridized media ecology should be taken into consideration. In addition, a large number of disability advocacy groups, more or less formally structured, have launched their own initiatives to activate the disability vote and make election material better suited to the needs and preferences of people with disabilities. These efforts should be explored in detail because they play an important role in how voters with disabilities interact with election information online. Finally, the vast majority of the participants involved in this study were voters with disabilities. Future work should also examine the impact of the digitalization of politics on nonvoters with disabilities, who are likely at a heightened risk of exclusion.

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