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How to Use the Web to Build Consensus  
and Boost Participation

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*To Hurricane Betz*



*Everyone can now speak online, but surprisingly few can be heard*

David Karpf





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## Foreword

The power of organizing starts with people. What we learned on President Obama's campaign in 2008 and what was confirmed in 2012 was the importance of relationships. The best messengers were people you knew. It was friends talking to friends, neighbors talking to neighbors, students talking to students. It was about meeting people where they are and increasingly that was online.

Since the 2012 campaign, I have had the privilege of having conversations with political leaders and organizations all over the world. I believe that the best practices we learned from years of leading the Obama organization can be applied universally. At the core of our campaign were the people. It was the volunteers who showed up after work to spend hours on the phones. It was the mothers who brought their children along to knock on doors in their neighborhoods. It was the young people who shared information with their friends on Facebook. What we know now is that campaigns are constantly evolving, and successful campaigns will be the ones that are innovative and stay ahead of the curve.

Facebook was relatively new when we started organizing in 2007 and we did not fully know the impact of Twitter heading into 2012. But we knew the person-to-person contact that was so important in 2008 would be taking place not just on the ground, but also online. That's why the campaign made an early investment in digital-specific strategy. It paid huge dividends when we raised more than \$690 million online, connected with millions of people over email, and ultimately engaged 150 million Americans throughout the course of the campaign.

The effective use of online resources helped the Obama campaign widen its footprint significantly in 2012. These same tactics can be applied to campaigns across the globe to help broaden their reach. Gianluca Giansante's book sheds light on this growing field and adds a critical piece to the conversation about modern campaigns. Online political organizing is in its infancy but will only continue to get stronger as more people get plugged in and as organizations become more digitally sophisticated. Smart campaigns, whether in America, Italy, or anywhere else, will take advantage of this technology to better facilitate relationship building. It all comes back to friends talking to friends, and that's happening more frequently now through digital channels.

It's exciting to think about the new technologies that will emerge in the coming years to help campaigns stay connected. But there's one constant that will remain,

regardless of the latest technology or social organizing tool—and that’s the people. No matter what the latest platform is, the emphasis must remain on the people. It will be incumbent upon campaign and party leaders not to lose sight of that.

Washington, D.C.

Mitch Stewart

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All politicians and political organizations have a web profile. Almost everyone is on Facebook, many have a website, and a large percentage have a YouTube channel or Twitter account. However, just because you are on the Internet does not mean you are using it effectively.

Almost all the research in this area shows that politicians have yet to tap into the real potential of online communication. In many instances, their online presence is actually completely counterproductive. Most politicians use the web like a TV; they talk, give their opinions, and share their points of view, but they do not listen or interact with others. Even when they do, they are not very convincing: instead, they argue, antagonize, and even go so far as to insult their public.

In short, despite the widespread use of the web, there still isn't a strong culture about *how* to use the Internet to build and bolster political consensus.

*Online Political Communication* has been written to fill this gap. The book analyzes different tools and identifies the most effective ones for different situations. How do you build a website for a candidate? What are the possible pitfalls? What is a blog for? How do you use Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to build trust and boost participation? How can you ensure that a larger number of people know about you and support your cause? And, above all, how can participation online be transformed into active participation offline? In these pages, we will address these and other questions, as well as reference real success stories (and cautionary tales).

The goal is to help politicians and those working in institutional and social communication to use the Internet as a tool for building trust with citizens and generating consensus for their specific programs.

Before continuing, it is important to point out that using the Internet effectively is not the be-all and end-all solution. (Online) communication is not enough: there needs to be a good political program, a strong alliance capable of generating consensus, a well-established popular base of support, a solid organizational structure, and a beatable opponent.

Within this larger framework, online political communication can play a key role in building a wide base of supporters and reinforcing the candidate's image, thereby making it easier to achieve other goals. In other words, if a politician is perceived as being strong and has a good image and a large following, it is easier to build a strong alliance, select the best staff, and attract volunteers.

It is worth clarifying another point: one should not think of online communication as a standalone activity focused on the number of Facebook "likes," Twitter followers, and website traffic. The web only makes sense as part of a broader strategy. The creation and growth of an online community of supporters should never be a goal in and of itself; instead, it should fall within a larger strategy that understands an election is never determined by any single large factor but rather the interaction of many small ones. The goal of those working on the web is not to conduct the best online campaign, but to win the campaign (with the web being an important component of that victory).

It is also useful to clarify the working method. Online political communication often starts from one of two distinct points of view. In some cases, the theoretical side is privileged, failing to take into account the difficulties encountered in everyday operations, especially the hectic context of an electoral campaign. In others, the practical side is emphasized (i.e., intuition and experience), failing to take into account evolving scientific contributions that often trump the knee-jerk response "but we've always done it this way."

In online communication—as in all other fields—to achieve quality results you have to bring both theory and experience to bear; you have to test the theoretical assumptions empirically to evaluate their effectiveness and determine which ones produce results at too great a cost versus which ones are both effective and energy and resource efficient. To that end, *Online Political Communication* is based on scientific research that has been tested through direct experience managing online communication projects. The book is geared not only to those involved in political communications, but also to anyone seeking to use online communication as a tool for sharing information and building consensus.

Effective online communication is a key element for political campaigns as well as information, opinion, and mobilization campaigns. It is useful for helping win elections but also in the social realm, helping to influence institutional decisions and build consensus for a proposed action, as well as to attract volunteers, donors, and clients. *Online Political Communication* is written, then, for those working in institutions, associations, and nonprofits and those representing corporate interests and communication.

When we talk about "politicians," we are talking not just about candidates, administrators, and those elected to representative assemblies, but also political organizations, associations, and lobbyists as well as companies, professionals, entrepreneurs, and those working in sectors where it is important to build consensus for decision making, products, and individuals. In other words, it is a book that seeks to provide motivation and food for thought for those who, in their personal, professional, or political lives, see the web as a tool for building trust with individuals and a means to improve the quality of their own work.

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*Note:* words and terms marked with an asterisk are listed in the Key Words Glossary at the end of the book. Graphic elements in the text can be seen in color and in greater detail on the author's blog at [bit.ly/gg2015figures](http://bit.ly/gg2015figures).

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### Abstract

An Internet connection is all that is needed to launch an online petition and create a social-network profile. The Internet offers unprecedented communication opportunities. Before the emergence of digital media, enormous resources were required to start up a newspaper, television channel, or radio station; however, today everyone has the means to spread their individual message to an audience of potentially millions of people. But if everyone has access to the same Internet opportunities, why do some succeed and others fail? Why are some campaigns met with such enthusiasm, able to raise money and boost participation, while others use the very same digital tools only to be passed over practically unnoticed? The first obstacle has to do with an awareness of the tools' capabilities: The Internet can open up a staggering array of opportunities, but we must know how to take full advantage of them. So how can we best use digital media? First and foremost, it is important to understand that the logic of digital media is actually quite different from traditional media, as well as to shed many preconceived notions about the web. For example, unlike with traditional media, on the Internet negative comments are actually positive.

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If it is true that everyone has access to the same Internet opportunities, why do some succeed and others fail? Why are some campaigns met with such enthusiasm, able to raise money and boost participation, while others use the very same digital tools only to be passed over practically unnoticed?