

Developing Digital Inclusivity In Advocacy and Political Campaigns

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An old problem with new relevance

'there are longstanding issues that have been given some attention [in digital inclusion research] — gender, race, and class, come to mind (and I would add disability as well, among various other issues) — but remain often in the background, lacking the conceptual and empirical attention' (Goggin, 2018: 5)

- Increased value of digital campaigns during the pandemic gave this concern new relevance
- Are existing digital inclusion frameworks suitable to ensure everyone can become involved in digital politics?

Existing frameworks are limiting

- Often this question is equated with digital divide issues in both theoretical and empirical work:
 1. First-level digital divide: access
 2. Second-level digital divide: usage, motivation, and skills
 3. Third-level digital divide: outcomes and experiences of people's interactions with internet-based media (or lack thereof)
- All these approaches tend to focus on inclusion as a measurable outcome – useful after the fact
- We must also focus on process – ask ourselves: how do we get there?

Inputs behind digital inclusion/exclusion

1. Evolving technological infrastructure
 2. Workarounds and adaptations by marginalized communities
 3. Political organizations' inclusivity – the ability to be proactively inclusive through meaningful and motivating opportunities for digital participation
- What factors, incentives, and barriers shape digital inclusivity (or lack thereof) for advocacy and political campaigns?

Digital inclusivity as a strategic priority

- Traditionally, political organizations have favored scalability and ‘controlled interactivity’ (Stromer-Galley, 2014)
- ‘Tactical’ success metrics are privileged over those that evidence deeper engagement – prioritize ‘majority’ publics

BUT

- Demographic and voting trends are set to the test the idea that campaigns can win without prioritizing inclusion and inclusivity, e.g.:
 - 10% of eligible U.S. voters are naturalized citizens
 - Since 2018: Record election turnouts among Asian, Black, Hispanic, and disabled voters

Disability and digital inclusivity

- People with disabilities are traditionally marginalized in politics and under-represented at all levels of government

BUT

- Over 35 million eligible voters with disabilities in the U.S.
- Digital disability activism: pivotal in defending the Affordable Care Act (2017-2018); new disability-related PACs
- Digital disability research mainly focused on accessibility and equal opportunities: look beyond

Method

- Empirical grounded theory generation
- Two main stakeholders in digital inclusivity: political organizations and marginalized people
- To start: experience of disabled political operatives in disability engagement roles
 - Combines ‘community’ and ‘professional’ perspectives
 - Consistent with a ‘third level’ digital divide approach
- 20 in-depth interviews with DNC and campaign officials, top disability rights organizations and networks – specialized pool

“Accessibility is just getting to zero”

- Legislative frameworks (ADA & HAVA) are ineffective
 - Rapid change: from no presidential campaign websites accessible in June 2019 to most websites accessible by September + disability policy platforms for most campaigns
 - Two sources of change:
 - Pressure “from within” (advocates embedded in political organizations)
 - Outside pressure from digital advocates (e.g. #CripTheVote network)
- Digital activism as driver of change in ‘formal’ politics through accountability

A cultural revolution: from “accessible” to “inclusive” digital campaigns

- Stopping at accessibility = failed campaigns: 2016 Hillary Clinton digital campaign technically accessible but not engaging
- Considering people with disabilities as needing “special” spaces creates “online ghettos” – including in 2020
- Digital campaigns must boost motivation to participate – content and digital affordances matter!
- Political organizations need to go *“from considering a person with a disability as someone who needs to be ‘taken care of,’ to someone who is a full citizen and legitimate political actor.”* (Former member of Congress and disability rights campaigner, August 2020)

Technological design informed by a new culture

- Reconsider campaign tech design processes:
 1. Inclusive campaigns *'meet people [with disabilities] where they already are online [...] on Facebook and Twitter'* (Disabled voters coalition leader, August 2020) – don't build separate online spaces
 2. Apply situational awareness: be mindful of how tech features and requirements may place an extra burden on some people – especially those in multiply marginalized groups

Example: Crowdsourced story-based campaigns

The image shows two overlapping website screenshots. The background screenshot is for 'volunteerMS' and features a navigation menu with items like 'What Is MS?', 'Symptoms & Diagnosis', 'Treating MS', 'Resources & Support', 'Living Well with MS', and 'Research'. The main content area has the text 'volunteerMS SHARE YOUR STORY' and a paragraph explaining the mission: 'Thank you for joining the movement to help create a world free of MS! Each person touched by MS has a unique story. By sharing your experience, we raise awareness, engage others in the MS movement and provide hope to people living with the disease. By sharing experiences and hearing stories of others, people who know little about MS can gain understanding from those closest to the disease. Please take a few moments to answer a few questions about yourself and what you're doing to support our mission. Feel free to attach extra pages or a photo of yourself, especially if you have any photos from MS events or programs. This information may be used in Society publications, Web sites, for events or advocacy awareness, or for media interviews. Please mail completed form to: StoryBank Coordinator, National MS Society, 192 Nickerson Street, Suite 100, Seattle, WA 98109, fax to (206) 284-4972 or e-mail MSnorthwest@nmss.org'. Below this is a contact form with fields for 'First' and 'Last' name and 'Email'.

The foreground screenshot is for 'LITTLE LOBBYISTS' and features a colorful banner with the text 'SHARE YOUR STORY'. Below the banner is the logo 'LITTLE LOBBYISTS' with the tagline 'Advocating for Kids with Complex Medical Needs & Disabilities'. The navigation menu includes 'HOME', 'ABOUT US', 'BLOG', 'JOIN US', 'NEWS & MEDIA', 'SHOP', and 'DONATE'. The main content area has the heading 'Tell Your Story' and a paragraph: 'Children with complex medical needs and/or disabilities deserve to be seen, heard, and supported. Telling their stories is central to our mission – we take them with us when we visit legislators and we share them on our social media to create awareness. If you're the parent or guardian of a kid like ours, we invite you to share your story here and join the Little Lobbyists.' Below this is a progress indicator with five steps: 1. Tell us about yourself and your child. 2. Tell us about your child's health care needs. 3. Tell us about your child's educational needs. 4. Tell us about your child's accessibility needs. 5. Welcome to Little Lobbyists! The form includes a photo of a woman and a child, a 'Your Name' field, a 'What is your relationship to the child' field, and a 'Please confirm' section with a checkbox: 'I am this child's parent/legal guardian and am authorized to share the information submitted in this'.

Trevisan, Bello, Vaughan & Vromen
“Mobilizing personal stories: the rise of digital story banking in U.S. grassroots advocacy”
Journal of Information Technology & Politics, 2021

In closing, points to consider

- Digital inclusivity is tied to three key drivers:
 1. Pressure from (digital) disability advocates
 2. Rise of the disability community as a voter constituency
 3. Mainstreaming disability in campaign organizations
- Four digital inclusivity principles:
 1. Embed inclusivity from the start
 2. Meet people with disabilities 'where they are online'
 3. Focus on motivation, not only access
 4. Develop situational awareness to inform tech design
- Challenge: Real advances made during Covid-19, but will innovations and the new organizational mindset 'stick' post-pandemic?

Asante sana - Thank you!

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