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Professionalizing Campaign Text Spam: How Technical Marketing Rhetoric Influences Rapid Change to the Professional Communication of Politics

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Abstract - In this brief paper, we report findings from an ideological rhetorical analysis of the technical marketing materials of politically focused peer-to-peer texting service companies Peerly, Hustle, RumbleUp, and MudShare. Although other studies have focused on the efficacy and effects of SMS texts in political communication, the technical marketing used by P2P texting service companies is an understudied phenomenon. Through ideological rhetoric, technical marketing constructs narrative framings that control how campaigns use P2P texting as a political communication tool. In the sample of technical marketing materials studied, all of the P2P texting service companies emphasized the efficacy and speed advantages of the technology. Additionally, Peerly and Hustle highlighted grassroots organizing and hyper-personal communication while RumbleUp and MudShare took a more business to business tone focused on investment return and financial expediency. All four P2P texting service companies evince techno-capitalistic ideology in their technical marketing materials, which functions to obscure the potential harms and possible solutions to the oversaturation of SMS political marketing.

Index Terms - Ideological rhetoric, peer-to-peer texting, political communication technology, technical marketing

INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 disrupted communication across nearly all professional spheres. Organizations responded by accelerating the adoption of communication technologies. For example, professional communicators working on political campaigns during the 2020 presidential primary election found themselves without traditional message operations such as door-knocking campaigns, in-person town halls, and candidate meet and greets. To solve this problem, these professional communicators rapidly reassigned resources dedicated to traditional political communication outreach to emergent political communication technologies such as Short Message Service (SMS) based peer-to-peer (P2P) text messages. The rise of political text messaging became so ubiquitous that the 2020 election became referred to as the "Texting Election" [1]. Two national elections later and the use of P2P texting in the professional communications of political campaigns has exploded.

An estimated 15 billion political text messages were sent to U.S. mobile phones in 2022 [2]. Political texts are celebrated by campaigns for many of the same reasons such texts are reviled by consumers: texts are difficult to ignore, mimic personalized communication, and are insufficiently regulated [3]. Reinforcing a negative framing of campaign texting, media headlines have emphasized the public nuisance of campaign messages invading personal phones [4] and framed barrages of messages as being inevitable and without recourse [5]. With the rapid adoption of SMS text messaging in political campaigns, and the subsequent consumer and media pushback, P2P technical providers have had to redouble their efforts to market their services.

METHODOLOGY

In this brief paper, we will report findings from an ideological rhetorical analysis of the technical marketing materials of politically focused peer-to-peer texting service companies Peerly, Hustle, RumbleUp, and MudShare. Where other studies have focused on the effects of SMS texts as campaign communication [6] [7] [8] [9], the role that technical marketing plays in constructing how P2P texting is used by political campaigns is an understudied

phenomenon. An analysis of how political firms specializing in P2P texting market their political communication products is critical to understanding where this technology is headed in subsequent elections, which in turn may help illuminate paths forward for regulators and policymakers to consider. Two research questions guide our analysis: (1) how is political texting being technically marketed by politically focused peer-to-peer texting services companies? (2) What ideologies are expressed in the technical marketing of peer-to-peer political texting services?

Grounded in ideological theory [10] [11] and rhetorical criticism [12], our methodology focused on highlighting the ideologies driving political texting meta-narratives as captured by the technical marketing of peer-to-peer texting companies. Ideologies are "the mental frameworks [...] which different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of, define, figure out and render intelligible the way society works" [11]. Ideologies shape how people come to understand and interact with their reality. Our approach follows technical communication scholar Andrew Mara's [13] differentiation "from most technical rhetoricians" in locating rhetorical shifts "mainly in the documents that are intended to shape a future market through public relations and sales" [13]. Although we primarily analyze website content advertising the political utility of four P2P texting services (Peerly, Hustle, RumbleUp, and MudShare), the webpages conformed to various genres of technical marketing including FAQ pages, white papers, technical demonstrations, and product sheets.

Peer-to-peer texting service companies leverage technical marketing to shape the narratives surrounding SMS political communication technologies. By attending closely to such narratives, rhetorical critics may apply their craft to help expose what masquerades "largely unconsciously as common sense" [12] in technical marketing documents. The ideological consequences of SMS political marketing are obscured by the normalizing processes of technical sales, which then constricts what solutions become available for public imagination and statutory realization. To better understand these ideological consequences, in the next section, the technical marketing rhetoric of Peerly, Hustle, RumbleUp, and MudShare are closely examined.

ANALYSIS

A common persuasive trope of P2P texting technical marketing rhetoric is the emphasis on scalability, speed and intimacy that are framed as the presumptive desires of the voter. For example, Peerly frames P2P texting as a "groundbreaking technology redefining voter communications" that has made "call centers, phone banks & robocalls obsolete" [14]. Peerly argues that P2P texting offers people what they want: the perfect balance of

quickly accessing information without requiring a person to speak on the phone or navigate auto-dialer conversations.

Emphasizing the voter engagement rate of P2P text messaging (94%) compared to volunteer calling (38%), targeted emailing (17%), or mass texting (28%), Peerly frames P2P texting as just the right amount of intimacy to "actually engage your voter" as opposed to the "email blasts, robocalls or social media platforms" which "lack a human touch" [14]. This rhetoric of human intimacy is commonplace among P2P service providers. For example, Hustle also emphasizes P2P texting as scalable and intimate, useful for creating "meaningful," "powerful" and "genuine" relationships "that drive engagement, action and revenue" [15]. Hustle also uniquely reframes P2P as person-to-person rather than peer-to-peer, a move that, perhaps unintentionally, draws attention to the fact that peer relationships are an assumption made by P2P companies that is defined only loosely around the common quality of being enfranchised.

Peerly and Hustle's assertion of the intimacy of a P2P campaign exist in tension with some of their claims to speed and scalability, which rely on an ethic of expediency [16]. What makes the marketing more insidious is the hyper-personal nature of SMS text messages, which have been found by technical communication researcher Chris Lam [17] to facilitate social connectedness and relationships better than other communication mediums.

Development of scripts, receipt of message notices, and canned responses offer campaigns a streamlined method of maximizing the efficiency of their targeted text outreach. This discourse is also seen in the additional support services offered to manage voters reduced to numbers on a list. Peerly highlights their services to manage the phone number list banks for campaigns through an "auto cleanse tool" and "landline scrub" of lists.

Hustle emphasizes how P2P enables campaigns to show voters "that they matter" while promising clients will surpass their fundraising goals by "accelerating" the efficiency of contact management. While these are successful arguments for using the technology, such an expedient approach can tradeoff with the goal of relationship building, which risks campaigns burning out their supporter lists and creating voter reactance against their candidate or campaign. Even more concerning, the current approach of P2P texting service companies risks sacrificing ethical consideration and judgment [16] about the consequences of hyper-personalized mass marketing delivered to our pockets with minimal expense and effort.

RumbleUp [18] and MudShare [19] are politically focused peer-to-peer texting companies that primarily serve conservative political causes and campaigns. These platforms rely on much of the same efficacy and expediency type rhetoric that Peerly and Hustle do, however, RumbleUp and MudShare tend to root these arguments within more corporate friendly business logic

and terminology. For example, RumbleUp makes their case through a competitive market framing that emphasizes the quality of the business over the efficacy of the product. Where Peerly and Hustle elevate grassroots engagement, RumbleUp instead relies on the language of return-on-investment (ROI), cost-return analysis, and market dominance.

Animated gold trophies bearing RumbleUp's corporate insignia feature prominently alongside claims of how they have won "top industry awards" and have been the "best in P2P texting since 2018" [18]. MudShare emphasizes "consumer preferences" and a "by the numbers" justification for their P2P texting services. Mostly absent from the technical marketing of both RumbleUp and MudShare are the intimacy framings and rhetoric found in Peerly and Hustle. Such distancing belies the hyper-personal nature of P2P texting and the consequences such inescapable mass communication has on receivers is a possible explanation for why Republicans sent roughly 70% of the 15 billion political text messages during the 2022 U.S. elections [2]. However, campaigns would do well to resist a linear logic of inevitably larger returns on investment. Supporter cell numbers are not infinite and the more a campaign taps the P2P well, the more they risk supporter fatigue.

Returning to our first research question (how is political texting being technically marketed by politically focused peer-to-peer texting services companies), liberal and conservative P2P texting companies leverage efficiency and effectiveness rhetoric. However, Peerly and Hustle tend to idealize the intimacy of their services over traditional political communication technologies more than RumbleUp and MudShare, who emphasize efficacy, ROI, and consumer preferences more prominently. These similarities and differences between P2P service companies help answer our second research question (what ideologies are expressed in the technical marketing of peer-to-peer political texting services). That is, the discourse of financial and relational expediency in the P2P texting technical marketing material evinces a neoliberal techno-capitalist ideology [20] that leverages P2P communication technology to extract maximum value in the short term at the expense of longer term organizing gains for the movements these platforms appear to represent. Techno-capitalist ideology often obscures rational criticism by shifting the rhetorical focus away from the ethicality of embracing a new communication technology (an ought question) and toward an economic frame that assumes an ethic of expediency [16]. The consequence is that campaigns will continue to adopt novel mass communication practices well ahead of the capacity for regulatory and lawmaking systems to catch up. More worrisome is the persuasive power P2P texting has to influence an electorate absent the checks placed on other political communication tools.

CONCLUSION

In this brief paper, we have highlighted the ideological rhetoric that unites and separates politically focused peer-to-peer texting service companies. A unique feature of political communication technology as an industry is that unlike most other industries, politics develops its technology in a partisan and thus parallel relationship. Playing to progressive clientele, Hustle incorporates grassroots and intimate communication rhetoric more often than RumbleUp and MudShare, which treat P2P texting technology as a matter of impersonal business to drive fundraising for conservative campaigns and causes. However, although Peerly has a bipartisan range of affiliated political clientele, they incorporate intimacy, grassroots, and business rhetoric in their technical marketing. Additionally, the technical marketing of all four companies investigated for this study make ample use of expedient and efficacious rhetoric, emphasizing elements such as open rates, transmission speed, and deliverability metrics.

While the efficacy of P2P texting voter receipt rates has suggested their political utility, P2P technology service providers will increasingly face a media environment that highlights the mistakes of texting firms, risks of text messages for spreading misinformation, and the general sense of irritation from the scope of text messages voters face during election cycle. Media coverage of political text messaging in the 2022 midterm elections, for example, highlighted and amplified consumer irritation with the "barrage of messages," (refer to *forthcoming* [21]) while national media outlets disproportionately covered the accidental [22] and intentional circulation of misinformation [23] [24] [25] [26] [27]). Given these hegemonic media framings, service providers will have to adjust their rhetorical framings to account for the narrative of voter saturation and potential backfire effect, as well as establish their credibility to manage the technical challenges of effectively and accurately scaling voter contact through P2P text campaigning.

Based on the technical marketing of the P2P texting industry, the future of political texting campaigns appears to be bright. Government regulations have been, for the moment, staved off by the telecom industry's 10DLC rules for SMS marketing. Those rules have been added to the technical marketing of P2P texting service companies via compliance guarantees and assistance through the vetting process of The Campaign Registry [28]. Multimedia messages or MMS appears to be increasing in popularity as campaigns can more effectively engage the auditory and ocular senses of potential supporters through pictures, gifs, and short form videos. However, political campaigns should tread carefully as much of this technical marketing glosses over the increasing risk of alienating supporters through the oversaturation and hyper-personalization of P2P political text messages. Future research could focus on

MMS political marketing and the integration of artificial intelligence into politically focused P2P texting services, both of which pose unique challenges for candidates, campaigns, and the electorate that deserve further inquiry.

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