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The Problems with Social Media Affordances and Digital Political Campaigning

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Published in:
The Routledge Handbook of Political Campaigning

DOI:
10.4324/9781003333326-21

2024

Document Version:
Peer reviewed version (aka post-print)

Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):
Bossetta, M. (2024). The Problems with Social Media Affordances and Digital Political Campaigning. In D. Lilleker, D. Jackson, B. Kalsnes, C. Mellado, F. Trevisan, & A. Veneti (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Political Campaigning* (pp. 229-242). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003333326-21

Total number of authors:
1

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THE PROBLEMS WITH SOCIAL MEDIA AFFORDANCES AND DIGITAL POLITICAL CAMPAIGNING

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Note: This is an author pre-print of a chapter from *The Routledge Handbook of Political Campaigning*.

Please cite as:

Bossetta, M. (2024). "The Problems with Social Media Affordances and Digital Political Campaigning," In: D. Lilleker et al. (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Political Campaigning* (pp. 229-242). London: Routledge. Doi: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003333326-21

Abstract

Social media platforms open up new methods of candidate messaging, voter contact, and data acquisition. Currently, *affordances* is a popular concept used to study the relationship between political campaigns and how they use social media platforms. Scholars argue that since platforms have different designs, they offer different affordances that affect how campaigns use social media. This chapter evaluates each premise of the affordances argument and shows how it can lead to inaccuracies that are problematic for research. Ultimately, I argue that subtracting the concept of affordances results in a more precise framework to study political campaigning through structure and agency. Exactly how digital campaigning practices take shape will depend on the electoral system, platform structures, and how political actors decide to leverage platform structures to achieve their goals within a given electoral system.

Introduction

Political campaigns have a long history of using media technologies to achieve their political goals (Epstein 2018). When enough voters regularly use a particular media, political campaigns will try to 'reach voters where they are' and leverage that media technology to help win elections. In this sense, political campaigns' widespread adoption of social media is not so different from their earlier adoptions of print, radio, or television.

However, social media differ from these other media forms in an important way: the technological structures of each platform are different (Bossetta 2018). Although social media platforms share some properties that unite them into a single media category, the specific ways that these properties take shape across platforms will depend on how the platform is programmed. For example, all social media allow users to post content, but the format (text, image, audio, or video), length, and overall style of these posts can differ widely across platforms. In addition, how algorithms filter user-generated content, and what types of users that content can reach, will also differ based on the technological structures of each platform.

Such structural differences between platforms sets social media apart from older media technologies that are also important for campaigns, such as newspapers, radio, and television. These so-called 'traditional' or 'legacy' media exhibit differences across each category, but they are not fundamentally different in their underlying technological structures within each category. For example, print newspapers may vary in terms of their formats, distribution models, and qualities of journalism, but the technological structure of each newspaper is ultimately the same: a printed paper. Similarly, television stations have different programs and reach different audiences, but the underlying technology that beams this content to viewers is not drastically different across stations. Even online websites, and other digital media like podcasts, have relatively stable technological infrastructures in comparison with social media platforms, which can change significantly between electoral cycles.

Therefore, researching how political campaigns use social media in their campaigning is a complex subject, precisely because social media is not a singular technology. Rather, there are a multitude of social media platforms, and they can quickly add, change, or remove features in a way that affects their political utility for campaigns. Moreover, new platforms can enter the market, and the number of available platforms has increased substantially over time. Since campaigns have limited resources, they need to decide on what platforms to use and how to use them effectively as part of a broader digital, media, and overall campaign strategy. Thus, the use of a single platform is never fully disconnected from other parts of a campaign strategy, but each platform usually serves a particular function or role within that strategy.

Political campaigning scholars, in grappling with how to study the rapid rise and diversification of social media platforms, have tended to approach the question of how campaigns use social media through the concept of 'affordances'. As the name implies, a platform's affordances refer to what the platform offers (or 'affords') a user. For example, *visibility* and *anonymity* can be considered social media affordances (Evans et al. 2017), since platforms offer users increased exposure (visibility) through algorithms or the opportunity to hide their identity (anonymity) through custom user names or encryption.

The concept of affordances is often used to compare digital campaigning across social media platforms (e.g., Kreiss et al. 2018; Stier et al. 2018; Boulianne and Larsson 2023). Simply put, the affordances argument has three main premises:

1) *Since social media platforms have different designs, then*
2) Social media offer different affordances for political campaigns, and
3) These affordances affect how campaigns use social media platforms.

In this chapter, I will evaluate each premise of this argument to demonstrate how the concept of affordances can lead to inaccurate statements in political campaigning research. Such inaccuracies

are problematic, since they can lead to misunderstandings about what aspects of digital platforms affect political campaign behavior. To address these problems, I propose a reformulation of the affordances argument that approaches digital campaigning through structure and agency. First, though, the chapter provides a brief overview of the state-of-the-art conceptualizations of the affordances concept in social media research.

What are affordances?

It is difficult to answer precisely what social media affordances are, since affordances does not have an agreed upon definition in digital communication research (Nagy and Neff 2015, p. 1; Evans et al. 2017, p. 33). Scholars often use the word affordances 'casually' (Ronzhyn et al. 2022, p. 9), meaning that they do not define or specify what affordances are. While not defining a concept is permissible when there is sufficient understanding about what a concept refers to (think, for example, that campaigning scholars rarely define 'democracy' or 'technology'), the practice of not defining a concept is problematic when the concept has significantly different meanings. This is currently the case with affordances.

When scholars define affordances, the definitions are often ambiguous. A concept is ambiguous when it has 'several meanings which can be mistaken for each other' (Sartori 1984, p. 72). For example, Kreiss et al. (2018, p. 19) write that:

> 'The concept of affordances relates to what various platforms are *actually capable of doing* and *perceptions of what they enable*, along with the *actual practices that emerge as people interact with platforms.*'

In this definition, affordances refers to the capabilities of platforms, perceptions of them, and practices that emerge when people use them. These are three distinct meanings, yet they are subsumed under a single concept. Ronzyhn et al. (2022, p. 14) have recently offered an alternative definition that attempts to clarify the concept affordances specifically for social media:

> 'Social media affordances are the perceived, actual, or imagined properties of social media, emerging through the relation of technological, social, and contextual, that enable and constrain specific uses of the platforms.'

Here, affordances refers to properties of social media that are perceived, actual, or imagined. The problem with this definition is that perceived, existing, or imaginable properties comprise *all actual and hypothetically possible properties of social media*. Moreover, every relationship with technology is social and contextual. Thus, if *every* relationship with *all* possible properties of a platform can enable *and* constrain its use, then this definition excludes only usages of social media that have *no effect* on behavior (i.e., they do not enable and constrain). This definition is therefore

vague, which refers to when a concept is so broad that it does not sufficiently set boundaries for what properties are included and excluded (Sartori 1984, p. 42).

My point is to illustrate that definitions of affordances are often ambiguous or vague, which means that they do not accomplish the two primary functions of a definition: to clearly specify what is meant by a concept (reduce ambiguity) and to clearly identify to what the concept does and does not refer (reduce vagueness). However, it is also important to note that these definitions of affordances are not incorrect; rather, they are developed to capture the many ways that the affordances concept is used by scholars in practice.

For example, affordances has been used to refer to specific platform *features* like hashtags (Eddington 2019); *practices* of using platform features such as sharing or reacting to posts (Tagg and Seargeant 2016, Wang and Xu 2022); and broad *capabilities* offered by platforms like targeted advertising by political campaigns (Baldwin-Phillip, 2019). Therefore, both Kreiss et al.'s (2018) and Ronzhyn et al.'s (2022) definitions are technically accurate, since they cover the wide range of distinct meanings that scholars use affordances to describe. However, we should pause and question whether such ambiguous and vague concept development is desirable for the study of digital campaigning.

Ambiguous and vague concepts lead to misunderstandings and misclassifications, respectively. Affordances is ambiguous, because the concept is used to refer to distinct phenomena, for example: features, perceptions, capabilities, and practices. This creates misunderstandings in what aspects of social media are being discussed when it comes to political campaigning. Affordances is vague, because attempts to capture these distinct phenomena into a single concept leads to broad definitions that exclude few properties of social media. This creates misclassifications, because drawing the lines between what is and what is not an affordance is often unclear.

The conceptual problem of ambiguity leads to much difficulty in answering the question: 'What are social media affordances?'. However, and perhaps more problematically, the conceptual problem of vagueness also creates much difficulty in answering the question: 'What *aren't* social media affordances?'.

Social media affordances in political campaigning

Irrespective of these conceptual problems, scholars continue to use the concept of affordances to compare digital campaigning across several platforms (e.g., Stier et al. 2018; Kreiss et al. 2018; Boulianne and Larsson 2023). This scholarship typically argues that each platform has specific, distinct affordances that explain differences in how campaigns use them. For example, Stier et al. (2018) argue that German politicians need to 'adapt to the *unique affordances* of social media sites' (p. 51) and more specifically, that 'each Internet application has *specific affordances*' (p. 67). In their study, Stier et al. (2018, p. 67) posit that campaign strategies are 'mediated by the

various affordances of social media platforms,' and these mediations lead to content differences in what German politicians post across Facebook and Twitter.

Similarly, Boulianne and Larsson (2023, p. 120) argue that 'social media platforms have *different affordances* and *may* be used for different purposes', such as contacting journalists on Twitter or influencing public opinion on Facebook. Here, affordances are considered less as a mediator and more of a latent construct that politicians can choose to activate or not. Kreiss et al. (2018, p. 19) also stress the notion that campaigns strategically leverage the different affordances of platforms by arguing that 'campaigns place different electoral value on social media platforms *depending on* their affordances'. In some cases, platform affordances can 'limit their electoral value' (Kreiss et al. 2018, p. 12); for example, if a platform lacks a certain feature such as hyperlinking to an external site for fundraising or other calls to action.

Despite differences in how affordances are discussed in these studies, this brief overview is sufficient to highlight what I refer to as the 'affordances argument' in digital campaigning research. The affordances argument can be summarized as follows: since platforms are designed differently, then platforms offer different action possibilities – or affordances – that affect how campaigns use platforms to achieve their political goals.

The affordances argument has three main premises. The first premise is that platforms are designed differently, which is indicated by statements that platforms are *unique*, *specific*, or generally *different* from one another. The second premise is that these platform differences offer campaigns different affordances, which is indicated by claims that campaigns *may* use platforms *depending on* their affordances. The third premise is that these affordances result in differences in how political campaigns use platforms, which is indicated empirically by *content differences* in what campaigns post to different platforms (Stier et al. 2018) and *qualitative insights* from campaigners explaining how they evaluate the political utility of different platforms (Kreiss et al. 2018).

Certainly, there *are* differences in social media platforms and these differences may affect how campaigns use them for digital campaigning. However, my overarching argument in this chapter is that affordances is a problematic concept to approach this phenomenon academically. In the following, I will evaluate each premise of the affordances argument to show exactly where and how the concept can be problematic. Let's begin with Premise 1.

Premise 1: Platforms are designed differently

The first premise – *that platforms are designed differently* – is certainly valid. There are clear, empirically observable differences between social media platforms. These differences can be seen, for example, in the various interfaces, features, and functions that platforms have. Everything about these interfaces, features, and functions – from how they look to how they operate – is decided by a series of computational rule systems that are programmed by software developers.

Therefore, social media platforms differ in their computational structures, and these structures affect the practices of campaigns and the content of their online communication (Bossetta, 2018).

The computational structure of platforms will affect whether and how campaigns use them, because campaigns aim to strategically use media to achieve their political goals (Epstein, 2018). If a platform's design offers a certain capability (for example, targeting a certain block of voters or collecting data on them), then campaigns may decide that investing time, staff, and money into using that platform is worth the costs. Conversely, if a platform lacks a specific feature or functionality that hurts its electoral utility, campaigns may invest less resources in that platform or not use it at all (Kreiss et al. 2018, p. 12).

Apart from practices, the computational structures of platforms will necessarily affect how political content looks on the platform. This is because a platform's computational structure sets the rules for what content is technically supported (in terms of text limits and file sizes), the aesthetic style of how that content is rendered on the platform, and to whom that content can reach. Thus, it is technically more accurate to say that platforms differ in their computational structures than their designs or affordances. Although certain platforms may share similar features and aesthetic designs, or introduce features and designs aimed at copying those of another platform, social media differ in their underlying computer code and, as a result, how they operate as a technological system.

Premise 2: Platforms offer different affordances

Now, let us turn to the second premise of the affordances argument: that these differences in platform design *offer different affordances to political campaigns*. At first this second premise seems logical, since different platforms offer different benefits that campaigns can unlock by using platforms in specific ways. However, upon closer inspection, this claim has a number of flaws that relate to fundamental problems with the concept of affordances itself.

First, returning to the problem of ambiguous and vague definitions, the validity of the argument that platforms have different affordances depends on what is meant by affordances: platform features, platform perceptions, or platform capabilities? If affordances refers concretely to platform features, then platforms do not always have different affordances. For example, several platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, X, Telegram, and TikTok offer users the hashtag feature. Thus, describing this feature as a 'hashtag affordance' (e.g., Tripodi et al. 2023, p. 6) works against the argument that platforms have different affordances. Platforms can, and often do, have similar features; however, the underlying computational rule systems that dictate how these features operate remain different. Therefore, if affordances refers to features, it can be incorrect to state that platforms have different affordances.

A similar problem occurs if affordances refers to perceptions of the properties that a platform offers. For example, a campaign may perceive a certain platform as offering the affordance of *visibility* for their candidate. In today's social media landscape, a campaign might experiment with TikTok because the platform's algorithm is perceived as good for enabling virality, which leads to high levels of visibility. However, the affordance of visibility is not unique to TikTok. If compared to offline interactions and events, *all* platforms offer the affordance of increased visibility in one way or another.

Platform affordances may differ in degree, but they often do not differ in kind. In other words, all platforms offer affordances such as visibility, anonymity, and persistence (i.e., the duration of time that content is available on a platform, see Evans et al. 2017), but they do so in different ways and to different extents. Therefore, differences in platform affordances are mostly a matter of degree. Platforms rarely – if ever – offer truly distinct or unique affordances, especially since platforms often try to copy the successful aspects of their competitors. This works to weaken the claim that platforms have different affordances, if the concept refers to platform properties or perceptions.

To further highlight this point, a third meaning of affordances is the actual capabilities platforms offer and how campaigns use them in practice. For example, scholars argue that the *capability* to pay for political advertising is an affordance (Kruschinski et al. 2022), and the actual *practice* of targeting a political advertisement is also an affordance (Baldwin-Phillipi 2019). Social media have different policies around political advertising, and the way that political advertising actually occurs on a platform can be different.

For example, Facebook enables campaigns to upload a list of offline data on citizens (such as email addresses, home addresses, or phone numbers) and match that information to citizens' Facebook accounts. Campaigns can then pay to target this list of citizens with a political ad on the platform. This is called 'list targeting', since campaigns upload a list of citizens they want to target. Alternatively, campaigns can use Facebook's own classifications to target citizens based on a specific gender, geographical location, or set of interests. This is called 'platform targeting', since campaigns use the platform's own classifications for targeting.

TikTok, by contrast, does not permit or technically support either form of targeting. Instead, political campaigns can pay influencers to deliver a political message in order to reach a certain group of voters. This could be called 'influencer targeting'. Since influencer audiences can share features such as a common interest, political leaning, gender, age, or geographical location, campaigns can effectively target a group of voters with specific characteristics by paying an influencer to deliver a political message.

Whether a campaign uses list, platform, or influencer targeting, they are still paying for a political advertisement that is targeted to a certain group of voters. While the mechanisms of targeted

advertising are indeed different and vary across Facebook and TikTok, both platforms offer the affordance of a) paying for a political advertisement and b) targeting that advertisement to a certain group of voters. Therefore, to argue that Facebook and TikTok have different advertising affordances would only be partially correct: both platforms offer the same affordances of political advertising and targeting, but they do so through different structural mechanisms.

As these examples illustrate, it can be confusing and sometimes incorrect to argue that platforms have different affordances. By the same token, claims that a platform has unique or distinct affordances can also be inaccurate, especially if other platforms have similar features or can technically enable similar properties. It is this premise – that platforms have different affordances – where the problem of ambiguity is most pronounced. Since it is often unclear what affordances refers to in the social media literature (Ronzyhn et al., 2022), it is similarly unclear what aspects of social media platforms are argued to be different or distinct. Therefore, when attempting to explain campaign behavior through the concept of affordances, the ambiguity of the concept can lead to misunderstandings of what – actually – is being argued to affect campaign behavior. This results in downstream problems for the affordance argument's third premise.

Premise 3: Different affordances affect how campaigns use platforms

The third premise of the affordances argument is that *different platform affordances affect how political campaigns use them*. This premise implies two claims. The first is that affordances *cause* or *affect* some outcome behavior. Therefore, a causal relationship is proposed to exist between affordances (the cause) and campaigns' use of a platform (the effect). If one agrees with my argument that affordances is an ambiguous and vague concept, then this premise is difficult to accept. What, exactly, is doing the causing or affecting of campaign behavior? The second claim is that different affordances will lead to differences in how campaigns use platforms. Both of these claims can be problematic for research on political campaigning.

First, attributing some outcome behavior (campaign use) to a cause (platform affordances) indicates a causal relationship – namely, that affordances cause or affect some outcome behavior. Take, for example, the following claim by Kruschinski et al. (2022, p. 5): 'Due to Facebook's different affordances, we argue that campaigns adapt their messaging strategies to organic posts, sponsored ads, and ads.' Rephrased, the argument is that affordances cause campaigns to adapt their messaging strategies. If it is unclear what affordances are, then it is unclear what is driving cause and effect.

This causality problem becomes magnified when affordances are considered as a relationship between user and technology (Evans et al., 2017). In this (yet another) understanding of affordances, an affordance is not a technology or a user, but rather a relationship between the two. If affordances are relationships, then they are unlikely to drive effects. This is because relationships do not cause effects; rather, variables underpinning the relationship are always the true drivers. Or,

put another way, a key problem with affordances is that scholars often attribute affordances with 'doing something'. However, relationships do not possess agency and therefore, relationships do not really have the ability to do or cause anything in practice. To argue that a relationship has agency seems quite nonsensical, frankly.

Second, the claim that different affordances drive differences in campaigns' platform use is not entirely supported by empirical evidence. For example, despite the theoretical argument that platforms have different and distinct affordances, recent empirical studies that compare content across platforms find significant levels of overlap in what campaigns post to different platforms (Bossetta and Schmøkel 2023; Farkas and Bene 2021). As Boulianne and Larsson (2023, p. 16) found in their three-platform study of Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter during the 2019 Canadian elections, 'most of the content was cross-posted without changes to reflect the platform and/or what resonates on specific platforms.' Certainly, these empirical findings do not mean that campaigns use all platforms in the same way or for the same purpose. However, these recent findings do provide some counter-evidence for the claim that different affordances lead to differences in how campaigns use them.

Thus, the power of the affordances concept to develop causes or explanations of campaign behavior appears rather weak. In terms of causes, the ambiguity of affordances means that the proposed cause of a campaign's strategic use of a platform is often unclear. Is the proposed cause a feature, a capability, a perception, a relationship, or something else? Moreover, potential misunderstandings in what affordances refers to can lead to illogical reasoning. For example, if affordances are understood as the relationship between user and technology (Evans et al., 2017), it seems rather odd to argue that this relationship between user and technology causes an outcome behavior which, itself, constitutes a relationship between user and technology.

This circular reasoning results from affordances' vagueness: the concept is often too unspecific to accurately attribute cause and effect. On the more empirical side, emerging evidence from cross-platform analyses does not find clear-cut evidence that campaigns post significantly different content across platforms. While posting is only one function of platforms, my point has been to illustrate how theoretical claims about affordances may overemphasize platform differences at the expense of similarities in digital campaigning across platforms. This overemphasis of difference indicates that problems of terminology around political campaigning concepts should be taken seriously. The issues with affordances outlined in this chapter are more than a semantic problem of language; they affect theoretical expectations and may be limiting our ability to provide specific and logically valid explanations of campaign behavior.

Resolving affordances' problems with subtraction

How, then, might we address these conceptual problems with affordances? One approach is to add adjectives to the concept to try and distinguish between its various meanings. For example, Bucher

and Helmond (2018) identify eight such adjectives: *perceived* affordances, *technology* affordances, *social* affordances, *communicative* affordances, *high-level* affordances, *low-level* affordances, *imagined* affordances, and *vernacular* affordances. However, the differences between these various categories often overlap, and adding new types of affordances to the scholarly lexicon have not helped clarify a common understanding of the concept (Ronzyhn et al. 2022). Given affordances' fundamental problems of ambiguity and vagueness, it is unlikely that such a common understanding will ever emerge.

Research from psychology shows that although humans try to solve problems by overcomplication, the quickest and most effective route to a solution can often be subtraction (Adams et al. 2021). I argue that this logic can also be applied to solving the conceptual problems of affordances. Rather than overcomplicate an already problematic concept by adding adjectives to it, we can simply subtract the concept from the literature. I argue that this will not result in a significant loss of knowledge, but it will increase the clarity of concepts and language used to describe social media platforms and campaigns' use of them.

To illustrate this point, let us return to the basic premises of the affordances argument, this time with the concept of affordances subtracted. The affordances argument could then be rephrased as:

> *Social media platforms have different designs that affect how campaigns use social media platforms.*

This claim is clear, unambiguous, and verifiable. It posits that the structures of platforms cause effects in campaign behavior. Importantly, this claim does not argue that platform structures technologically determine what campaigns do. Nor does it exclude other, social factors that may affect campaigns' use of social media platforms like reaching a certain audience or demographic block of voters.

Rather, this reformulation of the affordances argument simply states that how campaigns use social media platforms is affected by aspects of their designs, which are different. This link between platform design and campaign behavior indicates a relationship, and relationships are a core component of the affordances concept (Evans et al., 2017). Therefore, I argue that we can still study the core aspects of affordances – relationships between social media and campaigns (i.e., digital campaigning) – without using the concept of affordances at all. In this heuristic, the challenge for research lies in identifying which aspects of platform design affect which aspects of campaign behavior.

Studying Digital Campaigning through Structure and Agency

If we subtract the concept of affordances from the affordances argument, then we are left with three elements to unpack: social media structures (design), campaign agency (platform use), and

the relationship between the two (how design affects platform use). Social media structures – or what I refer to conceptually as digital architectures – are the *'technical protocols that enable, constrain, and shape user behavior in a virtual space'* (Bossetta 2018, p. 473). If we think about vagueness – i.e., the inability to differentiate what to empirically include and exclude from a definition – this definition seems vague at first. The reason is that enabling, constraining, and shaping constitute all possible ways that a technical protocol can affect user behavior online. However, the difference between this definition and the concept of affordances is the focus on 'technical protocols.'

Whereas affordances can refer to several distinct phenomena in practice (e.g., features, capabilities, practices, or relationships), technical protocols refer specifically to computational rule systems. These rule systems, inscribed in computer code by software engineers and developers, are the fundamental mechanisms that affect how platforms operate. These rule systems govern what features are available, what happens when we interact with them (and don't), how these features and interactions are rendered to us through the graphical user interface, and how algorithms affect the spread of content on a platform (or don't). Thus, it is *not* incorrect to say that these technical protocols affect all possible actions of user behavior in a virtual space, because they do.

Therefore, a primary task for digital campaigning research is to identify the technical protocols of a platform that matter in some way for politics. Here, a helpful first step is to conceptually separate the functions of a social media platform – what it does – from the technical protocols that put these functions into form. For example, nearly all platforms share the functions of connecting users, allowing them to create content, distributing this content, and generating data. However, the specific ways that each platform accomplishes these functions through its technical protocols can differ.

For example, all platforms function to facilitate user connections, but who can connect and how they do so is determined by a platform's specific technical protocols. A user can be located on Facebook through searching their name, and a 'Friend' connection is established if a request is sent by one user and accepted by another. This differs from the 'Follow' mechanism popularized by Twitter, where user connections are often one-directional and do not require reciprocation. Furthermore, user connections on WhatsApp require a person's phone number, leading to a tighter network of personal contacts. Identifying how the same function is achieved through differences in platforms' technical protocols is a process called mapping, which offers a more precise conceptual framework and language than affordances to study political processes on social media (see Bossetta, 2023 for a roadmap on platform mapping).

In order to identify the functions of a social media platform that matter for political campaigning, it is helpful to consider the agency of political campaigns. Political campaigns are strategic agents,

and their goals are remarkably stable over time (Epstein 2018). At the broadest level, the goals of campaigns are to win elections by persuading and mobilizing voters. However, exactly how campaigns try to achieve these goals will be affected by the structures of the political system. For instance, the United States is an outlier in allowing nearly unlimited levels of fundraising; therefore, a key goal of American campaigns is to use social media to raise money (Ridout et al. 2021). In a multi-party system like the Netherlands, a key political goal is to establish governing coalitions with other parties. Therefore, Dutch campaigns likely exhibit less conflictual social media advertisements than their American counterparts, who are less concerned with post-election coalition formation due to the configuration of their two-party political system (Van der Groot et al. 2023).

In other words, the structure of a political system affects the specific goals of political campaigns. As strategic agents, campaigns will leverage various forms of media to try and achieve these goals. In evaluating different media technologies, campaigns will certainly consider what each technology offers – or affords – in reaching these goals. However, what campaigns are evaluating is the alignment between their strategic goals and how the technological structure of a platform can help obtain them.

Therefore, much of political campaigns' use of social media can be explained by a) the goals that campaigns need to obtain within the structure of the political system and b) how the structures of social media platforms can be leveraged to achieve those goals. These two types of structures – political and technological – affect the practices of how campaigns use social media as agents. Returning to the central argument of this chapter, these relationships between structures and campaign agency can be studied, and explained more precisely, without using the concept of affordances at all.

Although scholars may find the concept of affordances helpful, it is also worth considering whether it can be detrimental. I have argued here that affordances can be, and such detriments are easily avoidable through subtraction. Especially for non-native English speakers, affordances and its various adjectives can compound misunderstandings and add unnecessary complexity to an already complex research area. As scholars of communication, we should strive for both clarity and responsibility in our conceptual language.

Conclusion

Political campaigns have long leveraged media technologies to achieve their political goals. However, social media differ from prior media technologies in that the structures, audiences, and overall political utility of social media can vary widely across platforms. Scholars have used the concept of affordances to theorize, discuss, and explain how these differences affect campaign behavior.

In this chapter, I have shown how scholars' current use of the affordances concept can lead to inaccuracies that are problematic for research. I have also argued that subtracting the concept of affordances leads to a clearer, more precise set of propositions and terms for studying the relationship between social media and political campaigns. Without affordances, the study of digital campaigning becomes about the relationships between platform structures, campaign agency, and the broader political structures within which both are embedded.

At the very least, it is an interesting exercise to experiment with the idea of subtracting affordances from your own thoughts and lexicon. Try it, and you may find that you can often find another, more specific word or phrase to capture what you mean. If not, and you find that the concept of affordances absolutely essential to your research, hopefully this chapter will help you avoid some of the pitfalls of ambiguity and vagueness that the concept exhibits to date.

Given the rapidly changing nature of digital campaigning, and the fact that academic research lags behind actual campaign practices, it is important for digital campaigning scholars to discuss concepts in ways that clearly communicate our objects of study. Clear terminology is essential for mutual understanding and knowledge building, and scholars will need both as political campaigning evolves along with new media technologies that we cannot presently foresee.

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