

# Digital Media and the Surge of Political Outsiders: Explaining the Success of Political Challengers in the United States, Germany, and China

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## Abstract

There has been a recent surge of political actors and groups challenging the legitimacy of established political institutions and mass media. We argue that this wave is no accident; rather, it is driven by digital media. Digital media allow outside challengers to route around social institutions that structure political discourse, such as parties and legacy media, which have previously held a monopoly on political coordination and information distribution. Digital media have weakened the power of these institutions, allowing outsiders to maintain extreme positions that formerly would have been filtered out or suppressed by institutions structuring political discourse. In this article, we explicate mechanisms linking digital media to the rise of outsiders by discussing the successes of a diverse set of challengers fighting for attention and representation in the different political contexts of the United States, Germany, and China. We thus provide a novel explanation that systematically accounts for the political consequences of digital media.

## Keywords

political challengers, outsiders, digital media, populism, Trump, AfD, Chinese nationalism

## Digital Media in the Success of Political Outsiders

I use Social Media not because I like to, but because it is the only way to fight a VERY dishonest and unfair “press,” now often referred to as Fake News Media. Phony and non-existent “sources” are being used more often than ever. Many stories & reports a pure fiction! (Trump, 2017)

Around the world, there has been a surge of politicians and groups that continue to challenge the legitimacy of established political institutions and mass media while paradoxically having developed into important actors in the political systems they attack. While there have always been politicians and groups that have their power base outside established party systems and that are openly hostile to established political institutions, in the past these “outsiders” have struggled to achieve and maintain political relevance (Barr, 2009; Kenney, 1998). A reason for this “irrelevance” (Barr, 2009) can be seen in the opportunity structures (Koopmans, 1999; McAdam, 1996) that confronted outsiders in a pre-digital era. Challengers of the political status quo were forced to seek recognition in traditional media, establish broad social

legitimacy for their new groups or movements, or secure a foothold in established parties to gain influence in politics. Consequently, for them the price of political influence was limiting their systemic challenges and the acceptance of the legitimacy of institutions they were relying on to obtain power (Gamson, 1990). Those outsiders that did not follow this route quickly became irrelevant, even if they had initial electoral successes. In this article, we will argue that digital media have led to a shift in the opportunity structure in politics (Earl & Kimport, 2011), allowing outsiders to route around established institutions and to become entrenched and powerful political actors without their support. As we shall see, this allows them to attack the political status quo and institutions much more consistently and forcefully than

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in the past while at the same time establishing continuous political relevance.

Current explanations of the sudden international rise of outsiders have not sufficiently taken into account the role of technology; they have focused instead on crises in economic growth and national identity (Kriesi & Pappas, 2015), a hollowing out of established parties' membership and an associated loss of connection between them and the public (Mair, 2013), long-standing sinking trust in established media organizations (Ladd, 2012), and the increasing public contestation concerning the meaning of facts and the media's legitimacy in structuring political discourse (Davis, 2017). These explanations have much merit in explaining certain aspects of the current wave of outsiders' success, but they miss what enables these challengers to translate initial success into prolonged relevance in political systems while maintaining their challenge. The answer to this puzzle is digital media.

Here, we define digital media as the set of institutions and infrastructures allowing the production, distribution, and searching of information online. This includes infrastructures and services allowing groups to run email lists or groups on social networking sites as well as more elaborate institutions, such as online born news media or services allowing the targeting of specific population subsets (Jungherr, Rivero, & Gayo-Avello, 2020). We argue that these digital media change the political opportunity structure for outsiders allowing them to maintain strong anti-system challenges while still becoming influential in political systems. First, digital media enable outsiders to mount successful and ongoing campaigns to challenge the legitimacy of institutions that they would in the past have relied on to obtain power, such as political parties or media organizations. Digital media allow political actors to develop novel modes of channeling attention and support around issues or campaigns into persistent engagement (Bimber, 2003; Karpf, 2012). Thus, challengers can avoid depending on established structures and political organizations for political coordination and mobilization. Hence, challengers can forego the endorsement of these institutions and challenge them at will.

Second, digital media have challenged the monopoly of traditional media in reaching audiences and for consolidating political support. Today, this can be achieved by using a website or having a large following on social media (Bimber, 2003). Challengers can therefore get their messages out to supporters and others without relying on the good will of traditional media, weakening their role as arbiters or gatekeepers (Vos & Heinderyckx, 2015).

Third, growing economic pressures on media producers with the transformation of advertising away from print and television to online channels has led them to shift from conventional political coverage toward a focus on attracting attention (Chadwick, 2017). Again, this favors outsiders who challenge existing norms and

institutions: where editors might once have scoffed at actors who attack their legitimacy, today, traditional media are willing to cover controversial claims by challengers who attack the political establishment and the media themselves. Digital media thus enable challengers directly, allowing them to circumvent traditional media to reach audiences, as well as indirectly, as when traditional media cover positions articulated in digital media by actors formerly out of bounds of the accepted political opinion space to draw attention to their channels.

In combination, these characteristics of digital media allow challengers to route around established political institutions and the media and thus contribute to weakening the power of major institutions that have structured political discourse. This opens up the political space in beneficial as well as detrimental ways to voices outside the currently accepted political spectrum. By allowing outsiders to successfully achieve tasks that formerly needed the collaboration of established political institutions and the media, digital media have weakened the ability of these institutions to structure political discourse and thereby limit the degree to which outsiders were able to challenge the political status quo. The resulting social consequences are likely to be contingent on political and media systems (Jungherr, Posegga, & An, 2019); over time and across countries, this will lead to the emergence of different types of successful outsiders. They may come from the left, the right, or might be labeled populists. Thus, at times, digital technology will seem to benefit different political camps. Yet, we argue that in spite of these apparently different consequences, the success of different types of outsiders follow a shared underlying mechanism leading to the rise and entrenchment of challengers vis-à-vis the political status quo.

Our argument adds to the current state of the debate on political change through digital technology. While some have identified digital media as a tool deterministically disrupting established political power structures (Diamond, 2010; Gerbaudo, 2019; Margetts, John, Hale, & Yasseri, 2015), others have pointed to the role of technology in strengthening control by incumbents in the form of political, commercial, and social elites (Howard, 2005; Roberts, 2018; Tufekci, 2017). This dichotomy can appear as a kind of a historical phase model of technology that starts by helping outsiders to challenge the political status quo followed by a phase in which the status quo adapts and the same technology is used to counter these challenges (Tucker, Theocharis, Roberts, & Barberá, 2017). In addition, while much of the available literature is concerned with protest movements, flexible coalitions, or ad hoc movements and their specific challenges and opportunities (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Gerbaudo, 2017; Margetts et al., 2015; Tufekci, 2017), our account adds to this the focus on the use of digital tools by parties and subsequent consequences within party systems and electoral competition.

Our account emphasizes the mechanism by which digital media may allow political outsiders to sustain their challenge to the political system while at the same time developing into influential actors in said system. Yet, just because a mechanism allows this in principle, this does not mean that all outsiders are successful in realizing its potential or that they even choose to pursue the associated potential (Earl & Kimport, 2011). It is also possible for established political actors and the media to identify this mechanism and attempt to neutralize its utility for outsiders. The consequences of the mechanism that we identify do not deterministically lead to a rise of political outsiders. Instead, it provides opportunities for actors of this type which they may or may not manage to realize.

Furthermore, we bring together literatures that otherwise tend to remain separate. We combine crucial insights in the political uses and contributions of digital media from the literature on political mobilization and social movements and transfer them into the context of the more structured environment of political competition between parties with a special focus on the attempts of challengers to entrench their positions within party systems.

We expect outsiders in various countries to use digital media to actively route around established parties and the media. This should be true for outsiders with different positions on the ideological spectrum. Yet, while digital media should be used in similar ways, the success of these outsiders to become important contributors within the party systems they challenge may vary—since digital media are a contributing but not a determining factor to the success of political actors. To show the strength of our argument, we focus on outsiders in three countries which constitute a wide range of political and media systems: the United States, a presidential and two-party system with a highly pluralized and competitive commercial media system; Germany, with a parliamentary multi-party system and a mix of public service and commercial media in a corporatist media system; and China, with an authoritarian single-party system and a government-controlled media system. We thus select cases that allow testing the use of digital media by outsiders in countries that vary decisively with regard to their political as well as underlying media systems (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Zhao, 2012). By maximizing variance in political context variables while still identifying a similar effect of digital media on political developments, we thus follow the “diverse case method” for case selection (Seawright & Gerring, 2008). We argue that testing propositions through this analytic strategy gives strong leverage to our theory. In each case, we chart how digital media have crucially enabled outsiders to challenge established norms and institutions of the respective political and media systems and entrench themselves as a major force to be reckoned with.<sup>1</sup> As will be demonstrated, our theory therefore has explanatory power across a diversity of political contexts.

## Digital Media and the Erosion of Political Institutions

### *The Step-Wise Progression of Outsiders*

We follow Barr (2009) and define outsiders as actors or groups outside the established party systems. Often, they motivate their bid for political power by openly contesting or rejecting the legitimacy of established political institutions, actors, or media gatekeepers. Typically, this challenge consists of claims that established (party) elites are out of touch with the grievances of the people, in the pockets of big business, that the machinery is rigged in favor of insiders and that the media exclude dissenting voices and thereby compromise their role as neutral arbiters of political competition. Maintaining this challenge toward institutions that structure the political space means that outsiders regularly struggle with achieving political relevance even after initial electoral successes (Barr, 2009).

Typically, successful outsiders follow a step-wise progression:

1. Outsiders fight for a place in a limited political attention space, that is, the venues of political communication in a given polity (Schroeder, 2018);
2. They establish or take over a movement or party (McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001, p. 47f.);
3. They struggle for a share of political representation to pursue their policy goals and, in most cases, also seek political office (Vries & Hobolt, 2012);
4. They seek influence among governing groups or to maintain office in an environment that they continue to regard as adversarial.

First, outsiders fight for their share in the political attention space to become known and to signal to their constituency that they have a new champion in the political arena.

Second, they spearhead their efforts by means of a movement or party organization. In systems with majoritarian suffrage, this means taking over the leadership of an existing party. In proportional systems, this can take the form of establishing a new party. And in authoritarian systems, it means sustained mobilization to continue to push the dominant party-state in new directions. In any case, outsiders gain strength by appealing to a constituency that regard its interests as unrepresented by existing political institutions or overlooked by the media.

Third, once this organized spearhead has been developed or seized, outsiders need to gain office or win a share of representation or steady influence. This entails extending their support base. In doing this, outsiders face a choice between staying true to their original goal of a strong challenge to political and media institutions, or accepting some of the trappings of established institutions, such as the resources that come with office or the conventions of traditional media.

Finally, once in office or insofar as they have gained influence, outsiders have to maintain their position. As we have already seen, this involves some choices. For example, in parliamentary systems, they can moderate their tone and policy proposals which might bring endorsements of previously alienated parties or media institutions. But this comes at the risk of losing their core constituency. If, on the contrary, outsiders in office neither feel secure in the support of the party or the media, they can choose to maintain their outsider status and keep their constituency ready to mobilize which can translate into a permanent campaign against the status quo. Thus, even when they have achieved part of their goals, outsiders can continue to attack political and media systems to keep their supporters engaged. This new adversarial stance toward legacy media and democratic institutions, which can be sustained even as challengers become more entrenched, has not previously been highlighted in discussions of online politics.

### *Routing Around the Institutions That Structure Political Discourse*

This step-wise progression toward greater influence for outsiders is enabled by digital media. They allow them to build organizations that coordinate supporters, to create alternative information spaces and route around established media to get their messages heard, and to make their support visible to gain and sustain legitimacy.

In the past, outsiders had to tone down their rhetoric and demands so that they could fit within established political institutions to be able to mobilize its resources in the pursuit of support or votes (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015, p. 130) or to be seen as viable coalition partners for established actors and factions. Or they had to try to entice traditional media to cover their positions and activities favorably (Gamson, 1990). The functional monopoly of organizing and covering politics in the past remained with established political institutions and the media (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). This structuring filter which guaranteed that challengers of the political status quo remained within limits has eroded, and so has the ability of political institutions and media to structure political discourse.

Digital media have allowed outsiders to build organizational structures on the cheap that they can use to identify potential sympathizers, mobilize supporters, and measure their success (Gerbaudo, 2019; Karpf, 2012, 2017; Theocharis, Vitoratou, & Sajuria, 2017; Tufekci, 2017). In the past, these tasks required the help of established political organizations, like parties or interest groups (Aldrich, 2011; Bimber, 2003). Digital media free challengers from having to rely on the resources of established institutions like party organizations in their step-wise progression toward public support. This lack of constraint, in turn, allows challengers to remain outside the consensus of the political status quo while still wielding political power.

Digital media also enable outsiders to sidestep traditional media, the established gatekeepers of political competition. They provide highly effective, quick and cheap means of information diffusion to supporters and to put the agenda of challengers before wider audiences (Benkler, Faris, & Roberts, 2018; Bennett, Segerberg, & Yang, 2018; Entman & Usher, 2018; Schroeder, 2018). While coverage in traditional media remains important in reaching large parts of the population (Webster, 2014), exclusion of a candidate or issue in news coverage no longer carries the same weight in the political attention space as it did 20 years ago. Furthermore, increased economic pressures on media organizations brought about by digital news environments has led newsrooms to being more open to the messages of outside challengers even if these violate the norms of discourse—including attacks on the media themselves (Hamby, 2013; Wells et al., 2016). The expectation that another competitor will cover the offending message in any case and the threat of losing audiences and clicks means that what constitutes legitimate political discourse is no longer entirely controlled by news publishers (Chadwick, 2017; Jungherr, Posegga, & An, 2019). By side-stepping as well as by garnering attention in established media, digital media allow challengers to get their message out even while challenging the very institutions that until recently had a monopoly on deciding whose message would reach a mass audience.

Thus, by allowing outsiders to successfully achieve tasks that formerly needed the collaboration of established political institutions and the media, digital media have weakened the ability of these institutions to structure political discourse and limit the degree to which outsiders were able to challenge the political status quo. This mechanism contributes to the current wave of persistent challenges by outsiders emerging across a variety of political and media systems. We will show the value of this framework by discussing recent examples of outsiders in three quite different political and media systems: the United States, a political system with majoritarian rule and a highly fragmented media system; Germany, a system of proportional representation with a publicly funded and only mildly fragmented media system; and China, a one-party system with a highly centralized media system.

### **Outsiders in Action: United States, Germany, and China**

#### *United States: Outsiders in the White House*

The political system of the United States is based on majoritarian rule and, in practice, a two-party system. The implication for outsiders is that they can mount a challenge by means of a third party that may influence the public agenda but will not win elections at the national level. To obtain office, outsiders need to win in the primaries of the Republican or Democratic party which can then translate into electoral success and thence into government. To do so successfully,

outsiders must capture the party machinery and its elites to overcome more established party figures. In the terminology of Barr (2009), this makes them “mavericks.” One way for outsiders to do this is to base themselves on the allegedly unmet grievances of unrepresented people of the party’s unheard groups and beyond.

Recently, there have been three outsider candidates, mavericks, who challenged their parties in pursuit of the Presidential nomination: Barack Obama (D 2008), Bernie Sanders (D 2016) and Donald Trump (R 2016). All three candidates were outsiders in relation to their respective party establishment; all three challenged core tenets of their parties’ platforms; all three broke with the established way of doing things; and all three relied heavily on digital media to do so.

*Building Parallel Organizations: Obama (2008) and Sanders (2016).* In 2008 and 2016, Barack Obama and Bernie Sanders ran on platforms that challenged the leadership of the Democratic party. In this, they were outsiders challenging the norms and institutions of the part of the political system in which they subsequently had to rely in a potential national election campaign. To win the Democratic nomination, both candidates used digital media to build a parallel organizational structure to that available to their insider opponent, Hillary Clinton. While Clinton in 2008 and 2016 quickly locked up the support of many elites, donors, and local organizers traditionally affiliated with the Democratic party, Barack Obama and Bernie Sanders had to move outside established structures. They used digital media to create lists of people attracted by their message and personality and not necessarily through their affiliation with the Democratic Party (Plouffe, 2009; Weaver, 2018).

With their highly active online presences, they made it easy for people to connect with the campaign and point friends and family to their sites. By obsessively soliciting email addresses of anyone coming into contact with their campaigns, they built up powerful lists of supporters that they could ask for donations, volunteering, and most importantly to turn up during the primaries to vote for Obama and Sanders (Kreiss, 2012, 2016). Thus, digital media allowed outside candidates to mount a high-profile challenge to the Democratic Party establishment without relying on the party’s resources. At least in the case of Obama, this approach proved successful in expanding the number of people who voted and changed the composition of the Democratic primary electorate so that he, as an outsider, won over the insider candidate Clinton. Sanders too, despite an unsuccessful run, energized a part of the electorate that his establishment opponent was unable to reach. While the use of digital media to build organizational structures in parallel to established party organizations did not deterministically lead to success, both Obama and Sanders used them for this purpose.

The year 2016 experienced another outside candidate who mounted an even more fundamental challenge to his party,

the American political system and the media. In this, he also relied heavily on digital media, but in a way that was quite different from Obama or Sanders. While these two used digital media to build alternative organizational structures that allowed them to connect with prospective voters irrespective of the support structures of the Democratic Party, Donald Trump used digital media not so much for organizational purposes, but rather to mount his challenge of the status quo and establish his viability as a Republican candidate.

*Winning the White House, 140 Characters at a Time: Donald Trump (2016).* During the Republican primary race, Trump first had to signal to primary voters, donors, and journalists that his challenge was serious, despite receiving mostly negative media attention and being widely perceived as an unviable candidate. He did so by using Twitter to secure a continued media presence. This signaled growing strength to onlookers and his base of supporters who were at that time outside the mainstream. He used Twitter to post outrageous claims about minorities, his political opponents, and the media, breaking with the established norms of electoral competition. News editors in earlier times might have rejected covering Trump’s violations of norms; but in the new competitive environment of online media, Trump and his streams of offense guaranteed high viewership and readership numbers that proved irresistible to journalists (Covles & Schroeder, 2018).

This visibility was especially valuable in a primary season with 17 major candidates competing for public attention. In a highly fragmented attention space, Trump was the only candidate who could consistently rely on a prominent place in the news which ultimately, despite the strong resistance of the Republican establishment, led to an acceptance of the inevitability of his candidacy. By giving him space over the other candidates, traditional media contributed to Trump’s securing the nomination (Wells et al., 2016). In fact, there was a symbiotic relationship whereby Trump and the media both profited. Trump’s campaign (and his presidency) not only attracted additional viewers critical of the current system but also created a constant sense of crisis among viewers supporting the status quo, thus guaranteeing increased viewership at a time when news media are under intense economic pressure (Waisbord, Tucker, & Lichtenheld, 2018). Although he had been an outsider challenging the very media outlets that publicized his candidacy and positions, Trump was able to monopolize attention and establish himself as a front runner.

Trump used digital media shrewdly to gain media coverage, but he also used it to reach people in a way that differed markedly from the Obama and Sanders campaigns. Instead of using digital media to purposefully build up a base, the Trump campaign paid major online platforms—like Facebook, Google, Twitter, and YouTube—to marshal their analytic and distribution infrastructures (Kreiss & McGregor, 2018). While his campaign spent less overall than the Clinton

campaign, the share of his spending on online ads outstripped hers. As with Obama, there was a focus on the use of digital tools to reach people directly, but instead of building dedicated infrastructures, the Trump campaign rented them.

*Keeping the Outside Base Engaged: Donald Trump in Office.* A key difference between the outsider challenges of Obama (2008) and Trump was their strategic positioning after winning the nominations of their parties. After winning the Democratic nomination in 2008, Obama toned down his rhetoric challenging the Democratic Party and instead made himself its standard bearer. Accordingly, once in power, Obama accepted the resources and the legitimacy of the political party machinery and Washington politics. Thus, he ran the risk of abandoning his outsider electorate that got him elected. In 2016, this abandoned electorate partly fueled the primary run by Bernie Sanders and even in parts switched to Donald Trump.

In 2016, Trump took a different approach. He never toned down his challenge of the part of the party not supporting him, Washington, or the media, even after winning the Presidency. Unlike Obama, he chose to consistently appeal to his base of outsiders with ever more extreme challenges to the political and media systems. The strength of this base continues to be signaled through images from Trump rallies and their apparent strength on social media, be it in the form of publicly visible online interaction metrics or in the vehement opposition that journalists and political competitors face online when criticizing Trump.

One reason is that unlike Obama, Trump cannot be sure that he has the loyal support of the Republican establishment. Hence, he cannot dispense with the shock troops that brought him to power or risk losing the Republican Party. Only by constantly reaffirming his success in extending the Republican coalition via his outsider support base can he keep the establishment on his side; if he is seen to lose this base, he risks losing the party. Thus, his only strategy is a permanent campaign; he cannot risk losing his outsider base as Obama did during his time in the White House. Trump therefore continues to rely crucially on digital media as an alternative means to reach people and attract media coverage—even though he is formally in power.

### Germany: Outsiders in Parliament

Germany is a parliamentary democracy with proportional representation. Thanks to a moderate threshold for representation in parliament of 5% of the votes, outsiders have been repeatedly successful in forming parties and entering parliament. The long-term success of the former outsider parties, *Die Grünen* (Green party) and *Die Linke* (The Left), illustrates this potential. While the challenges of both could rely on existing organizational infrastructures and resources as well as an ideological alignment with parts of the mainstream media, today's outsiders heavily rely on digital media.

*Taking Bottom-Up Organizing Seriously: The Pirate Party.* The first German party that was successful in using digital media in their challenge of the political status quo was the *Piratenpartei* (Pirate Party). From 2009 to 2013, they frequently entered the public attention space and to some appeared like the future of political organization. Central to the party's challenge was a quest against a perceived hierarchical and non-transparent style of politics in representative democracies. Their view of democracy was much closer to a continuous plebiscite instead of a representative system in which power holders are held accountable by regularly held elections. Internally, they hoped to achieve this form of politics by using the software LiquidFeedback. The platform was designed to enable inclusive and broad deliberation and joint decision-making within the party.

In doing so, the Pirate Party took to heart and implemented one of the normative core tenets of digital political theory (Karpf, 2011; Kreiss, 2011). They used technology to allow for broad participation, at least among members of the party and a continuous tethering of party functionaries to the party base. Yet, exactly this organizational choice contributed to their demise. Initially, the party was successful in presenting a fresh approach to politics and in representing topics not covered by the established parties. This was met by largely favorable news coverage and successes in various state elections. But over time, as public attention shifted and established parties took positions on the hitherto largely neglected issues of Internet policy, the Pirates faded from the polls as quickly as they had appeared. The open source approach to politics meant that the Pirates were not able to successfully adapt to their changing appeal at the polls. The lack of a robust and hierarchical organizational structure allowed internal factions to be publicly at war over who was legitimately allowed to speak for the party. All the while, the LiquidFeedback system did not allow the party to position itself credibly and consistently on issues going beyond Internet policy. The resulting continuous disunity contributed to inertia and frustration among supporters and the public. Thus, while digital media gave rise to the Pirate Party ideationally and organizationally, digital media alone did not guarantee continuous success for this challenger in German politics.

*Digital Outsiders From the Right: The AfD.* The AfD presented a different sort of challenge in German politics. The party was founded in 2013 largely in opposition toward Angela Merkel's Euro policies that were regarded as adverse to German national interests (Arzheimer, 2015). With this platform, the AfD nearly managed to enter parliament in 2013 and to gain a 7.1% vote share in the European parliamentary elections of 2014. After these early successes, the party soon became engulfed in heavy infighting between a faction loyal to the original Eurosceptic platform and another group—which has since prevailed—looking to broaden the platform to include right-wing and anti-immigrant positions. On this

more radical platform, the AfD managed to win a 12.6% vote share in the 2017 parliamentary election and form a strong block in the German parliament. The AfD challenges the German status quo by taking positions widely seen as going beyond the common political consensus and provoking politicians and journalists with controversial statements aimed at gaining media attention. Digital media are central to the activities of the AfD in mounting both challenges.

The party has used its online presence on platforms like Facebook to point supporters to alternative news sites and selected stories in established media that support their point of view (Stier, Posch, Bleier, & Strohmaier, 2017). This has allowed the party to construct an alternative information space for their supporters that seemingly supports the party's extreme claims and enforces the view among supporters that information is selectively suppressed by traditional media. This supposedly selective view also serves as a basis for attacking mainstream media and especially publicly funded media as being biased against the party and its positions. Thus, the party has used digital media to disseminate information that contradicts the coverage of politics in mainstream media, thereby legitimizing their political positions while delegitimizing critical coverage in the mainstream media.

Furthermore, digital media have served as a space for AfD supporters to interact with likeminded users. By enabling community building and coordination among party supporters, digital media are likely to have emboldened hesitant supporters by circumventing "spiral of silence" mechanisms that limit the public's voicing of extremist opinions (Chen, 2018). The centrality of digital media to both the AfD and its supporters is reflected in the success of its online presence which has outperformed the presences of other German parties in terms of measurable Facebook interaction metrics (Stier et al., 2017).

Second, as in the case of Donald Trump, the AfD has used digital media deliberately to goad established media into covering its positions by generating controversy. Whenever an AfD politician or local chapter voices an extremist opinion on social media, journalists have spread the quote to wider audiences. The critical dissection of these messages is then reframed by the AfD and its supporters as further evidence of rampant political correctness by a hostile press corps. A leaked AfD strategy paper revealed that inciting controversy to attract coverage and negative reactions by established parties was regarded as a core strategy during the election campaign in 2017 (Tagesschau, 2017).

In sum, the cases of the Pirate Party and the AfD both show that, in Germany, outsiders of different political leanings have relied on digital media in the organization of their challenge, to coordinate and strengthen their supporter base, and to circumvent political coverage of established media organizations, all the while playing on editorial decisions to attract media coverage and thereby reach broad audiences for their positions. Thus, outsider groups in Germany, with its

political system of proportional representation and a mix of public service and commercial news media, have successfully used digital media to circumvent the monopoly of established parties and media for political organization and the distribution of political information. These functional uses of digital media resemble those of challengers in the United States, with its majoritarian system and predominantly commercial news media. Yet, what about outsiders in non-democratic systems? For this, we turn to China.

### *China: A Gathering Storm of Ultrationalism*

While analyzing the uses of digital media by challengers in the United States and Germany was relatively straightforward, in the case of China things become slightly more complicated. For one, what form do challenges to the political status quo take in a single-party authoritarian system? Here, the long-standing challenge to the Communist Party by Chinese ultrationalists offers an instructive case.

Ultrationalists seek to put their nation first, domestically and externally. In this respect, they pursue a "China first" policy and go well beyond the nationalists of earlier periods which mainly sought to unify the nation. In China, these challengers want to expel those who are not nationalist enough internally and assert the national culture vis-à-vis outside enemies, hence "ultra." While the motivations of Chinese ultrationalists vary—including Han ethno-nationalism (Carrico, 2017), "nostalgic" communism, and Confucian civilizationism (Dikötter, 1994)—they challenge those in the regime that do not stand up enough to its enemies, internally and externally. In this, they are supported by factions within the party barred from publicly advocating positions that depart from the party orthodoxy (McGregor, 2010; Zeng, 2016) but that perceive Chinese interests to be under threat by pro-liberal media professionals, intellectuals, and democracy activists (Han, 2018; Zhang, 2019). A common complaint among Chinese ultrationalists is that the mainstream media favor these liberal elites and do not represent "the people's" views (Osno, 2014, pp. 337–338).

The use of digital media for the dissemination of information challenging factions in the party and liberal elites has long been a staple in the repertoire of ultrationalist challengers in China. Yet, their online popularity also provides evidence of the public support for ultrationalists, thereby circumventing the centralized control of the party and of the media by the state.

*Online Spaces as Staging Grounds of Ultrationalist Challengers.* Ultrationalists have had a strong online presence from the beginnings of Internet use in China, starting with the bulletin board systems (BBS) that continue to be popular today. Ultrationalist forums have thousands of people posting and readerships in the millions (Leibold, 2010). And as economic inequality has grown, the postings increasingly reveal a fault line between "the virtuous

people” and the corrupt elites bent on enriching themselves. The “moral decline” of China is thus attributed to “unsubstantiated conspiracy theories about how minority elites are teaming up with foreign forces to split China and undermine its national interest” (Leibold, 2016, p. 11). Examining these forums over long periods shows that the most common form of political expression is not to propose constructive political alternatives, but rather to denounce factions within the regime regarded as too close to the West or too liberal: according to Han (2018),

the struggle over online expression [. . .] is no longer a struggle by concerned citizens against the repressive state for freedom and democracy; it is a national defense war in which patriotic netizens side with the regime to defend China against online saboteurs. (p. 27)

More recently, the challengers have moved to social media. Sina Weibo is a Twitter-like service that has been, for almost a decade, among China’s preeminent forums for political discussion (Rauchfleisch & Schäfer, 2015). Yet, in recent years, Sina Weibo has been overtaken in popularity by WeChat. While WeChat operates under a more restrictive policy in terms of spreading messages, it has also become a forum for ultranationalist sentiment. For example, Chen, Mao, and Qiu (2018, pp. 82–88) detail the case of protests concerning a Chinese American policeman in New York who was accused of unlawfully killing an African American man in 2016. In response, hundreds of WeChat groups sprang up in the American Chinese community and in mainland China. They protested against what they saw as the racism of this incident and contrasted it with other cases where (ethnic white) policemen were similarly accused but not charged. The protest ended 2 months later when the policeman was put on probation and ordered to do community service rather than sent to prison, a mild sentence which was seen as a victory for the online mobilization. What is noteworthy about this protest is that the government did not censor it, despite its scale and strong organization. It can be assumed that this protest was seen as supporting rather than undermining the regime. Another example came in the wake of the recent fire which burned down the roof the Notre Dame cathedral in France. In response, a post on WeChat on 16 April 2019 (the day after the fire) said,

They (the French) deserves it (the fire). This is the wheel of karma. The heaven will not forgive. They (the French) were extremely happy when they burnt down the old Summer Palace in Beijing. I do not feel sorry for anything. Just want to say, “nice fire.”<sup>2</sup>

In other words, this post, which received lots of support, expressed *Schadenfreude* at the misfortunes of the French people as a kind of retribution for the injustice of French colonial regime which was party to burning down a national Chinese treasure in October 1860. However, this

comment also constituted an attack on many Chinese netizens and representatives of Chinese official media who expressed sympathy for the French, which in turn invited counterattack.

Our examples show that outsiders use digital media to either explicitly or implicitly criticize the regime by expressing ultranationalist sentiment on digital media. While they are unable to take over the party, these outsiders use digital media to strengthen certain factions within the party and thereby seek to tip the balance in favor of their China first policies. Digital media thus serve a similar function as they do for outsiders in democracies; Chinese outsiders can route around institutions like the official party position or the mass media to voice and publicize their challenges.

*How Outsiders Demonstrate Their Public Support.* We have seen in our German and US examples that outsiders who often start out with few resources can establish organized challenges that can ultimately form or take over parties and enhance their visibility by means of digital media which also translates into traditional media attention. In China, this is not possible in the same way; yet, ultranationalists are able to mobilize online. While these efforts could also move offline, this is unlikely as this would be more hazardous and resource-intensive. Online protest can also be dangerous, but ultranationalism, unlike other types of criticisms that challenge the party’s legitimacy, may be more tolerated. Their challenge supports de facto factions in the party that rely on ultranationalists to voice extremist positions they themselves cannot state publicly. Protest on digital media thus also becomes a way to informally assess the strength of movements without them having to take to the street, thereby giving legitimacy to related stances of challengers within the party.

The mobilization of popular support to strengthen the regime has a long tradition in China (Wu, 2007). The party relies on public opinion and the regime’s “legitimacy lies in the claim that they represent the interest of the majority” (Tang, 2016, p. 158). At the same time, the Chinese regime does not allow organized opposition, so inputs from civil society remain fragmented, unlike in democracies. Online protest against the regime can be repressed (Roberts, 2018), but the state also uses social media to gauge and respond to public concerns. Tang (2016) has argued that the regime is stable because it relies not just on the strong support from the population but also that it is “hyperresponsive” to public inputs. Since it does not rely on democratic inputs, the party-state must be constantly attuned to public opinion; again, a tradition with deep roots in Chinese history whereby the emperor’s legitimacy rested on the public’s approval. And nationalistic popular support, unlike other challenges from below, is less threatening, and so offers the regime a means to bolster its legitimacy—internally and externally—so long as this gathering storm does not become a destabilizing force or cause embarrassment to the regime (as we saw in the Notre Dame fire example).

Ultrationalists can thus mainly either be harnessed or kept within bounds; driving them underground might lead to losing a valuable resource that supports the regime. They are not just tolerated but also encouraged—but only by some factions within the regime. There are other, more “liberal” factions that are more cosmopolitan and pragmatic and that favor a less aggressive role of China in the world, as well as a more tolerant attitude toward minorities and a more relaxed attitude toward China following a less distinctively Chinese path. These more liberal factions among Chinese ruling elites have to contend with the voices of ultrationalists online that support their opponents. Digital media thus become a space in which outsiders can show off their support among the public without having the option of taking to the streets or using the institutional instruments available to challengers in democracies.

### **A Growing and Noisy Extension of Political Competition**

Digital media have created a means for outsiders to route around established institutions and the media by providing alternative communication and organization tools. Outsiders have thus been able to maintain their challenges while remaining viable and increasingly successful outside of traditional political structures. This means that political discourse has lost the guard rails which have kept political competitors from the extremes where they would normally remain ostracized and without access to resources.

The cases presented here show how this process has taken place in different political and media systems. In the United States, we showed how outsiders from the left and the right used digital media to build alternative organizations which allowed them to mount successful campaigns in opposition to the organizational resources of established parties. We also saw how they used digital media to reach publics and supporters with their messages without relying on traditional media while at the same time goading the media to include often outrageous and controversial claims.

In Germany, a parliamentary democracy with proportional representation, we found outsiders like the Pirates using digital media to realize a different form of party organization. It was another outsider, however, the AfD, which successfully used digital media in a similar way to the US case to establish an alternative information environment for its supporters and to provoke traditional media outlets into carrying its messages by being controversial.

In China, a one-party autocracy with a low tolerance for factionalism among political elites, we found outsiders using digital media to provide alternative information to supporters and to make this support and its public resonance publicly visible without forcing supporters onto the streets. Digital media have thus become an important venue for legitimizing an outsider position and showing

support for ultrationalism independently of mass media coverage or mobilization within party structures.

While all three cases clearly differ in terms of levels of success, political goals, and tactics chosen by outsiders, it is nevertheless possible to identify a common mechanism whereby digital media support these challengers. Digital media allow outsiders to route around established institutions like parties or established media which have hitherto had de facto functional monopolies on political organization, information distribution, and the arbitration of political competition. By allowing outsiders to organize, establish alternative information environments, and goad mass media into covering them by taking controversial positions, as well as providing legitimacy by making visible alleged support, digital media significantly strengthen the position of outsiders across political and media systems. They do so, as we have seen, depending on how digital media best allow this circumvention in view of the existing dominant media system.

This also does not necessarily mean that there is a particular side of the political spectrum that consistently profits. Successful outsiders will sometimes come from the right, the left, or represent new political alliances, such as populism. Nor do we expect governments, established political elites, or media to stand still in the face of the advantages presented by challengers of the status quo. Outsiders will not always be successful, as the case of the Pirate Party attests.

But we do expect digital media to extend the spectrum of political discourse and to consistently broaden the menu of political options across countries and political systems. In some cases, this will lead to more pluralism in public discourse. In others, it will lead outsiders from the far right and left to gain a greater presence and more public visibility for claims that were previously excluded from public discourse by established institutions. The current widespread wave of right-wing populism can be seen as one expression of this. But in view of our arguments, we would expect this and other current challenges to established party systems to be only the first wave among many. However, a broadening of the spectrum of political discourse does not necessarily mean that extreme factions will win or stay in power, which depends on additional factors. Instead of witnessing a decline of democracy driven by digital media, we may thus be observing the erosion of a number of institutions that kept discourse artificially restricted by forcing political competition to adhere to certain bounds. While the future of political competition might be noisier and less polite than we are currently used to, opening up the space of political competition might also be an invigorating stimulus that contemporary social conditions demand.

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## Notes

1. Our framework does not apply to regimes with completely closed political institutions and excessive repression like the personalist regime in North Korea. However, the share of authoritarian regimes with “democratic institutions” like political parties is constantly growing (Schedler, 2013).
2. We would like to thank Pu Yan for alerting the authors to this post.

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