

THE IMPLICATIONS OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN POLITICAL COMMUNICATION. A NEW FORM OF ELECTORAL CAMPAIGN

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Abstract: *In this paper, the author, starting from literature, makes a brief analysis of political communication and message transmission during the election campaign via the Internet in general, and through social media in particular. The power of new technologies to mobilize the electorate has been proven in US election campaigns from 2008 when Barak Obama used them with great success, but also in Romania's presidential campaign in November 2014 when Klaus Iohannis became president as a result of using the social network Facebook. In the short period since it began to be used in political communication, the Internet has managed to transform the way in which politicians, political parties, government organizations, but especially the media and, not least, the citizen acts.*

Key words: *electoral campaign; social media; communication; Internet*

With a broad and effective potential, new media is the concept that has transformed the understanding of mass communication, its implications in political communication causing change to the way of communication, constructing strategies and conducting election campaigns. Thus, in political life was introduced the online environment as a combative new space where individuals, organizations, political institutions and even Governments communicate and negotiate their messages and political roles (Boşoteanu, 2011: 47-48). Modern man's life was changed almost suddenly by new technologies, and communication in the public sphere has witnessed the fastest development in relation to what had previously been (Davis, 1999: 27).

The emergence and development of the Internet has led to a radical change in the way political communication currently operates; there is certainly a strong connection between technology and communication. We cannot exist without communication, and the presence in virtual/social space involves the exploitation of communication in all its forms, the political environment benefiting fully from the advantages they confer. If journalists and politicians in the past were those who transmitted the political message, in "the era of social media, influence power of politicians and journalists has dropped considerably, and the process of communication is conducted by users of social networks, which customize, transmit and debate the political message through an interpersonal communication in their social groups" (Tănase, 2014: 7). The Internet offers the possibility of politicians to interact

with voters, to talk and to listen. The politician is facing a different kind of electorate, younger and familiar with the Internet for which political messages must be adapted in accordance with the expectations and requirements of such an audience. Thus, a traditional media channel no longer represents the single channel through which the political message is transmitted and public images are formed.

Claude-Jean Bertrand believes that, until 1997, the Internet was not reckoned as media, but its extremely rapid progress has made to be included in this field (Bertrand, 2000: 34). Specialized research based on the construction of political and electoral communication online reveals the evolution and adaptation of this type of communication at the global trends in the use of new media. According to specialists, the Internet was the tool that changed the nature of political communication through which the political message was conveyed in the following areas:

- volume: can be transmitted much larger amounts of information compared to other models of media communication;
- speed: the time it takes for sending a message was greatly diminished;
- format: combination of printed communication and electronic information was able to enable audio, video and text format. Thus, the receiver is stimulated simultaneously, in a dynamic and visual form;
- direction: communication is interactive and synchronous in real-time and in wide space, with high speed of message's circulation;
- performance testing: voters can decide what to see and what to be published (Gibson and Ward, 2000: 304).

Since the end of the past Millennium online activity was felt, although access to the internet was limited in the lines of population engaged in civic act, and its importance was largely due to the increase of applications in the field of trade or online entertainment at the expense of information that encouraged political participation, of web designers charges who were steadily increasing, but also of the capacity of candidates or parties with notoriety in the offline environment to better guide voters in virtual environment (Pătruț, 2011: 58). In a very short time, social media has managed to become the most important and exploited channel in mass communication and political actors have tried to understand its operational mechanisms in order to be able to use it in election campaigns, aware that online audiences has become a key factor that has to be turned into an important vector for the transmission of political message. The Internet offers us in communication with voters and innovative methods such as email, blogging, online feedback mechanisms, participation on social networks like Twitter or Facebook, a network that has significant impact on media, society, health and politics and has managed to revolutionize communication, becoming a global phenomenon (Bărbieru, 2014: 20).

Social media is conceived as a collection of web technologies that is made available to the general public and is intended to transform communications and content in interactive dialogue through social networks, like Facebook or Twitter, blogging technology, WordPress, via the site of

videosharing and photos, like YouTube or Flickr. Social media is a web-based infrastructure, very accessible to the general public and which helps users to publish online content interesting for them and for their friends and social networks are groups of people with the same interests and concerns.

Over the past decade, the Internet and social media, important elements in the process of globalization, have witnessed an exponential growth with a particularly high impact on people. Through social media individuals may access other networks than those whose active members are, separating themselves from inactive members (Lăzăroiu, 2010: 161-164), but the profile of participants in the online meeting shows that they are less committed to a political party and are younger than the traditional activists. Needing information about the party that appears on their website, they use mainly the Internet (Rune, 2010: 46) and subsequently, express in a stronger manner their support for the favorite candidates, becoming receptive and active. It also initiates the interactive communication being allowed dialogue among internet users and politicians. Interactive online communication is structured in an temporary interactive communication on the basis of which candidates are using social media platforms and establish interaction with voters during the election campaign, and after this moment they give up their presence online and interactive communication in which candidates find themselves permanently in the online environment and develop a communication framework regardless of election periods.

Today's political class, irrespective of the country of origin, understood that information is circulating rapidly between politicians, political parties, institutions and citizens, moving quickly with minimal cost over boundaries. Parties and candidates who do not receive significant funds for supporting the election campaigns and which cannot cope with the challenges of the big parties have a real chance to keep up with them, to attract the electorate and to reduce the gap between the known and the unknown candidates. The internet politics is now not only an extension of offline politics, as it was a few years ago. Virtual space has made available for sending the political message tools easily accessed and used through which complex information is transmitted and available to all interested. Internet addresses an audience much larger than the offline public and is not limited by geography, can attract disinterested groups, such a group being represented by young people whose major concerns are not political, provides information in a form accessible to the target groups, enables content modification in real-time such bottlenecks in informing citizens are avoided, citizens' information costs are reduced and monitoring is done in real time. Social networks and video sites have a significant involvement in sending political messages as long as they are used by a large number of users who spend more time using them.

During the 1996 presidential election in the United States, when Bob Dole encouraged voters to visit its website, using the internet in political and electoral communication drew the attention of academics and media. According to specialists, Dole's announcement was the symbol of the

beginning of Internet expansion in election process (Davis, 1999: 85), and during the campaign the researchers estimated that 29% of Americans have used it to gather political information (Gibson and Ward, 2000, p. 301). Thus, since 1996 US election campaigns, in addition to traditional components, have had an operational online component on the sites of candidates' campaign.

If television in 1960 brought John F. Kennedy's victory in the presidential election, in 2008 Barack Obama's victory was largely based on new media. It can be considered that the one, who kicked off the election campaigns held in the online environment for winning the presidential election, even though trends existed in 2004, was Obama. The name of the key element was social networking. In 2008 he counted on allies such as Facebook pages, YouTube channels and personal sites to promote his own image, thus complementing traditional campaign strategies in an innovative way at that time, with great appeal to the American public. With a relatively small budget, its political message went straight to the population and the impact of using the Internet to his campaign was compared to the impact of using television in Kennedy's campaign. 2008 was the moment when the Internet has changed the way of political reporting. In its struggle for the presidency, Obama used absolutely all the tools the Internet could offer in transmitting his election agenda, built dedicated pages by placing ads on video games and turned to sms for keeping abreast with supporters. His staff initiated the website called "Count the lies", which accounted for all the blunders, errors and lies of his opponent in order to provide comprehensive information about the Republican McCain to voters and volunteers. His victory has revealed that the massive use of the Internet has led to the mobilization to vote of large numbers for youngsters deprived of political interest. Specialists consider that they made possible that Obama become president of the United States, although it was considered inexperienced compared to his opponent and without chance because of his religious orientation.

In 2007, in his work entitled *New Media*, Dorina Guțu said that "the parties that will quickly understand the new social realities and appropriately adapt their messages will have the best chance of success. The explosive evolution of Web 2.0 and new technological and social realities require quickly identifying of differences that begin to occur within local elections, reevaluation of voting options considered traditional and outlining of electoral profiles specific to both media - online and offline" (Guțu, 2007: 105). The onset of the local blogosphere and the transition from passive to active in the field were made in the same year, blogs in which politics detached itself as the main topic were the ones of the politicians, political analysts and journalists.

Romania could not fail to register among the countries open to change, becoming a consumer of internet. If in the year 2013, the possibility of mobilizing the Internet was underestimated due to the lack of optic fiber connection that classed Romania on ranked 23 in Europe, 2014 has brought

about an increase of 80% of Romania's connection and ranked 5th in the European rankings, ahead of countries like Hungary and Bulgaria (Covaci, 2015: 86).

Parliamentary elections in 2008 used the blog as a primary tool of communication and transmitting political messages online. These have changed the flow of information on the Internet by supporting interaction between blogger with blogger-reader or blogger with other bloggers, format that favors those who are very active in posting information, dialogue-oriented and motivated to establish sustainable social relations. Considered as new opinion formers and the "fifth power in state", blogger politicians have mobilized their supporters and voters and were able to present themselves in a positive manner to the public (Pătruț, 2011: 59-60). Politicians in Romania understood that use of the Internet and blogs provide in the election campaign and beyond, notoriety, publicity, fairness presentation of their views, dissemination of political messages, but also a solid image. Although creating a political blog requires a relatively small investment and provides opportunity to all candidates to compete in the virtual environment in a democratic manner, in parliamentary elections in 2008 was used in a very low proportion (5.45%) by the candidates of political parties ranked on top. Overall, the online environment has resulted in the same situation as offline environment, preserving the relationships between political forces and discrepancies already existing (Pătruț, 2011: 60-62).

Social media involvement in electoral campaigns in Romania has become remarkable since the 2009 presidential campaign, when politicians communicated to potential electorate and even supporters places where could be seen, events they attended to, messages supporting their campaign and offered to supporters the opportunity to express their opinions on forums (Boșoteanu, 2009: 50). In line with the trend initiated in the US the year before, the campaign for the 2009 presidential election is the first presidential campaign in which local competitors have used Facebook site, along with websites and blogs campaign, but also sites video sharing, YouTube and other social networks such as Twitter. It was found that, in December 2009, in Romania there were 7.43 million Internet users, with tremendous growth in 2007. This was an electoral pool with extremely high potential that could not be avoided by politicians in our country (Momoc, 2011: 39).

Analyzing the election campaigns of Romania in the age of new technology, it can be easily noted their further progress in social media. Thus, the novelty of the November 2014 presidential election is given to us precisely by this innovative system. Having a major role in the campaign, social media has led virtually to the twists of situation between the two rounds of presidential elections in Romania. The effect was unexpected and worths to be considered for future elections. Diaspora voters turned out an unexpected potential after mobilization on the social network Facebook (Covaci, 2015: 85), and Klaus Iohannis is the first politician in Europe who managed to gather more than one million likes. Even in the first round had

about 500,000 likes, approximately 850,000 in the election day, managing to exceed Victor Ponta, immediately after the election, on November 28, Iohannis has reached a number of 1.2 million people who appreciated his page (Bărbieru, 2015: 142). Iohannis online campaign had a well thought out social media strategy, which offered to supporters in the virtual environment various quality materials and the target has been formed by young people between 18-35 years in urban areas. It was created a virtual campaign for this age group, his campaign staff being confident this was the only way the young could be mobilized to vote, many of them having no concerns and political sympathies.

Klaus Iohannis won the presidential election in Romania using social networks and Facebook proved to be the communications platform available for both candidates, social networking site where ideas of governance program were posted and where ideological battles were held to attract younger voters (Covaci, 2015: 90). Social networks have managed to exceed the traditional media, TV channels and newspapers. The convergence between the TV, Facebook and mobile telephony has had as a main consequence the massive mobilization of the exit at the vote and the transformation of a failure in success. Ioan Dan Niculescu, creative director of social media team of Klaus Iohannis, said after winning the election, that "The main objective was winning the election. To convey some political brand values need to resort to appropriate means, in our case we are talking about true, real, and effective means. We focused a lot on the online field that dominate our everyday lives and if I had to sent a message to a target audience, it was easy to see that a majority of Romanians are active in the online environment, we are talking of over seven million Facebook users" (Andriescu and Constanda, 2014).

If in the case of Presidents Kennedy and Obama, in addition to the innovative technology, we can take into account personal charm; in the case of Iohannis things have a different appearance. Without political experience relevant at national or international level, with speech difficulties, rigidity and displayed sobriety, although his political opponents thought that he cannot mobilize the undecided and the disappointed by politics and although it was not confirmed in a major election battle for right, Klaus Iohannis managed to reach the Romanian president position by carrying a primarily online campaign, and a secondly traditional one, and with a budget well below the one of his counter-candidate. According to some analysts, the Diaspora mobilized on social networks and transmitting images in real time had to say a very important word. Electronic solidarity has once again proved its propagation speed and the fact that media can amplify certain feelings, so millions of people can live synchronous the same emotion (Covaci, 2015: 91). The result of the presidential election in November 2014 makes us understand the importance of social media in increasing public participation of online audience and in dissemination of political messages through social networks users that can be used as the main vectors of communication during election campaigns. In future, election campaigns would give an

important role to social media which will be the main channels of electoral communication, with strategies created around them so that the result would be the one wanted.

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