



ORIGINAL PAPER

Election campaign and political communication through *social media*

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Abstract:

Starting from the literature, the present study analyzes the electoral campaign and political communication through social media and highlights the capacity of the Internet to transform the way of action of politicians, political parties, governmental organizations, the media and last but not least, of the citizen / voter.

New media is at the moment the concept that has succeeded in transforming the understanding of mass communication, causing radical changes in the communication manner, in the strategies and conduct of the electoral campaign. Virtual / social space exploits communication in all its forms, and politics benefits from these advantages, with the Internet providing the opportunity for politicians to interact directly with voters.

Keywords: *political communication; Internet; voters; electoral campaign; social media.*

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Election campaign and political communication through social media

Nowadays, political success or failure is largely dependent on the political potential and abilities of the community. In recent years we are witnessing a real revolution in the way of communication with the general public through the emergence of a new space for manifestation – the virtual space. The multidimensional nature of the Internet has led to a paradigm shift in all areas of activity, including politics, with the reader becoming a true producer of information. Thus, with a very high and at the same time efficient potential, *new media* is currently the concept that has managed to transform inside mass communication, changed the way we communicate, strategies and conducting election campaigns. The online environment manifests itself as a combative space in which politicians, parties, governments, local authorities, institutions, etc. must communicate and negotiate messages, as well as the political and administrative roles (Boşoteanu, 2011: 47-49).

The current century is dominated by digitalization, and progress is the key aspect in all areas of activity, including communication in all its aspects – everyday, commercial or political. Thus, we are offered many opportunities in terms of exchanging political and social ideas at the same time as various risks arise. Communication is a vast and complex phenomenon, in a continuous change, which is constantly adapting to the times. It generates new contexts determined by functional norms based on codes that involve communication processes adapted to the social structures to which they relate and the technology that society acquires at a given time. Without being a concept of today, political communication imposes new beliefs, aspirations and mentalities in order to change electoral attitudes and behaviors. Under the premise of conceptual uncertainty, political communication is evaluated or sanctioned equally by the electorate in terms of voting. It studies the interaction between the rulers and the governed, describing the behavioral and psychological changes that arise from this relationship, and participates in the development of democratic systems while transforming the field into one of public interest (Alexe, 2014: 31).

The form of online communication now made mainly through tablets and smartphones allows an impressively large number of users to actively participate in the political debate. The various social platforms provide us with public forums in which politicians initiate debates on various topics, and citizens have the opportunity to react. With the advent of new technologies, human life has changed a lot. Today's world is no longer the same world most of us were born in. We are more and more preoccupied with searching for information on the internet, commenting on social networks, documenting ourselves using virtual libraries. Social networks have seen a great development in the last decade. As a natural consequence, communication in all areas has experienced the fastest development compared to all that had been before (Davis, 1999: 27). In this context, social media has become the main channel of communication of the political message, more and more politicians understand that its inclusion in the campaign strategy is essential to have greater chances in front of the electorate. Conceived as a collection of technologies, social media is made available to the general public through its main role in transforming communication and content into an interactive dialogue. Today's social networks like Facebook or Twitter, blogging technologies, WordPress, photo and video sharing sites, like YouTube or Flickr, transmit information faster than ever and allow anyone to communicate with anyone.

According to some specialists, political communication is a process of distributing information and promoting awareness, ignorance, manipulation, consensus, disagreement, action or passivity (Tudor, 2008: 129). The main actors of political

communication are political organizations, the general public and the media. The interaction of these factors results in a discursive interaction between candidates and voters. With the advent and development of the internet, there has been a radical change in the way it works today. There is a strong connection between technology and communication, and we cannot exist outside of communication. The presence in the virtual / social space implies the exploitation of communication in all its forms, and the political environment fully benefits from the advantages that this status confers (Bărbieru, 2015: 42). Through the internet, politicians interact with voters, talk to them and listen to them. It turned out that today the politician faces another type of electorate - young and familiar with social media. Political messages need to be adapted to the expectations and demands of such an audience. It should be noted that since social media has made its presence felt in political communication, the power of influence of journalists has decreased considerably, the communication process being directed quite a lot by users of social networks. The radical change to which political communication has been subjected by the invention of the Internet is also given by the paradigm shift in the dissemination of the political message from an easily controllable form to a personalized form led by social network users (Tănase, 2014: 7). They distribute the political message and debate it in their virtual influence groups, not infrequently being even sources of information for the TV and written press. Traditional media, primarily the print media, has also moved online. Listening to, reading and watching the news has become independent of time and space, and the news can be accessed anytime, anywhere. "It is now possible for anyone, even financially, to publish and produce audio or video material. At first glance, some of these platforms are in direct competition with what Deutsche Welle, BBC, Russia Today and so on do. For example, "No Public.com" is one such platform, which claims to work with 130,000 so-called "city journalists" worldwide. They work without money, but there is still a codex, which decides what the information sent should look like", said, in 2008, Christian Trippe, director at Deutsche Welle Brussels (Pitu, 2008). Even though the traditional press has declined, the internet views of periodicals have increased exponentially, realizing that only by moving online can they stay in the readers' attention. Consequently, since the advent of the Internet, traditional media channels have become obsolete in a short time and in no case are they the only distributor of the political message and the only shaper of the public image, especially since, in the opinion of specialists in the field, online political communication has multiple advantages (Maarek, 2007: 269).

According to Bertrand, in 1997 the Internet was not seen as the media. However, through its rapid evolution it has been included in this field (Bertrand, 2000: 34). Specialized research based on the construction of political and electoral communication in the online environment reveals the evolution and adaptation of this type of communication to global trends in the use of new media (Bărbieru, 2015: 43). Through the Internet, changing the nature of political communication, the political message was transmitted in several directions: volume (greater amount of information transmitted compared to other media), speed (the time of transmission of a message being considerably reduced), format (audio, video and text - the receiver is stimulated simultaneously, in dynamic and visual form), direction (interactive communication in real time, wide space, high speed with which the message circulates), individual control (the voter can decide what to see and what to publish) (Gibson, Ward, 2000: 304).

If in the 90's the internet was not at the discretion of the general public, later, through an extremely rapid evolution, it becomes a good for everyone. After the

Election campaign and political communication through social media

technical difficulties manifested at the beginning of the phenomenon were overcome and it became an indispensable working tool, the distances between people became smaller, and communication became easier. Election campaigns and political communication have also moved to the online environment, nowadays the classic forms from rallies, meetings, written press, radio-tv being less and less used (Bărbieru, 2020a: 129-130). In September 2008, Phil Noble, Barack Obama's online campaign adviser, told the Business Standard magazine in Bucharest at the "Politica 2.0" conference that the success of an election campaign is conditioned by the use of the Internet: "You have to be open, experiment, and voters will see that. The Internet is not a magic wand, but it is the tool through which you can communicate and understand people on another level" (Burduja, 2011: 129).

According to statistics, the number of internet users increased from 90,000 in 1993 to 304 million in 2000 (Sinescu: 1). Thus, the invention of the Internet has led to irreversible changes in political communication and election campaigns and has linked them to technology in all aspects. In addition, the evolution of this means of communication seems spectacular compared to other means of mass communication – to reach 50 million users the radio had to consume 38 years, TV 13 years, and the Internet only 4. For the interval 2000-2007 there is a substantial increase in internet users in Europe (315 million), USA (233 million) and Asia (over 700 million) (Sinescu: 1), reaching 2.9 billion in the period 2008-2013 (Ciobanu, 2014) and almost 3 billion in 2015 (Deacu, 2015) and exceeding 4 billion in 2018, according to the Global Digital study published in January 2018 and conducted by We Are Social and Hootsuite (Popa, 2018).

We live in a climate where the flow of information from sender to receiver is very important. Although online activity has been felt since the end of the last millennium, social media soon became the most important and exploited means of mass communication. Politicians and political organizations quickly understood the mechanisms of operation and used it in election campaigns, being aware that the online public has become the most important factor that should be transformed into a vector for transmitting the political message. In communicating with voters, the Internet offers politicians a number of innovative methods and possibilities such as e-mail, blogging, online feedback mechanisms, participation stimulation or social networks, such as Twitter or Facebook. Facebook is the network with the greatest impact on the media, society and politics, which has managed to revolutionize the field of mass communication and become a global phenomenon (Bărbieru, 2020a: 132).

The advantages of social networks in political communication are multiple and refer to search engines that facilitate obtaining information in record time, the possibility of fast communication between politicians and voters, quickly combating negative news about a political party or a candidate. At the same time, there was the possibility of real-time distribution of political achievements or information about candidates, even personal or family information. Obviously, there are some disadvantages. They refer to prejudicial professional secrecy, the public profile of users / candidates or the need for time, congruence and consistency. Communication errors are quickly charged in terms of time and what is communicated through social media networks can provoke numerous attacks from the opposition or the general public.

For politicians, moving political discourse online has become vital. There is an irreversible movement of social media channels to online, determined by young people who use the Internet as the main means of information. The lower the age of Internet

users, the lower their presence in the classical media of political information, and not only. If in previous years candidates used social media platforms to establish interaction with voters only during election campaigns, now interactive communication is constant, and candidates are constantly in the online environment. They develop a communication framework regardless of the electoral periods. The political class understood that online information circulates quickly between politicians, parties, institutions and citizens, and the costs are minimal. The ease with which anyone can access information via the Internet has made traditional media make full use of this source in developing new advertising and profit markets. Not infrequently, the content published online has been copied in its entirety, on the one hand, and has entered the race to attract more and more new consumers through information dedicated to the online environment (Dumitru, 2009: 70).

For parties and candidates who cannot benefit from sufficient funds to support election campaigns in the classic form, the emergence of this form of online demonstration was a real chance to promote politics, attract the electorate and reduce the gap between large parties or known candidates. Online political communication or campaigning in the virtual environment is no longer just an extension of traditional techniques as it was some time ago, but is an easily accessible form of manifestation, which attracts disinterested political groups, offers the possibility of avoiding information bottlenecks for citizens by real-time content modification with low information costs.

The year 2008 marked the political communication and the electoral campaigns in the online environment just as the year 1960 marked this segment through TV. The Pew Research Center conducted a study between November 20 and December 4, 2008, which found that 55% of voters and 74% of American Internet users said they used websites to learn about elections and communicate with others on this subject. It was the first time that half of voters used the Internet for political purposes and when, according to one of the authors of the study, "voters ... were not passive in the political process". "Barack Obama is already using technology to improve presidential policies and help citizens take part in the political process. Obama's Internet campaign is just the beginning of Obama's use of the power of the Internet to transform politics and government. On barackobama.com, voters are connected not only with the election campaign, but also with each other; the campaign uses Internet technology to involve those who could not participate in person in presidential campaigns. More than 280,000 people have created accounts on barackobama.com. These users formed volunteer groups and organized over 13,000 specific events offline using this site" (Burduja, 2011: 133). To win the 2008 election, Obama relied on Facebook, YouTube and personal websites, managing to change communication mindsets, campaign techniques, but also the attitude of politicians towards voters. It is the moment when the need for politicians to be present on social networks becomes obvious both for the ease with which they could communicate their ideas and for the ease of presenting themselves to voters, thus satisfying their need to know the candidate (Stieglitz, Dang-Xuan, 2013: 1277-1291). Basically, from this moment the internet has changed the way politics is reported, especially since we have an electoral victory generated by the new media for a candidate who did not leave with the first chance, if we refer to the religious orientation and to the lower electoral experience compared to his opponent. Through excellent online communication, beyond all the elements that would have prevented him from winning through a traditional campaign, Obama became America's first black president. Thus,

Election campaign and political communication through social media

the influence of technology political communication has become evident in political circles, changing substantially.

New media techniques combine all the elements of old communication techniques - text, sounds, graphics, moving or synthesis images, technological facilities. Through online systems, the speed of information transmission is very high, and the message transmitted is transmitted by both specialists and individuals. The basic principles of communication (communicators, channel, public, content) are preserved, but the advantage of permanent access to the content of the political message is registered. This advantage is facilitated by devices available to anyone today - laptop, tablet, phone. Users can actively participate in debates, provide feedback to any politician or political party, and can be both consumers and content creators.

The new methods of conducting election campaigns require finding all those who have the right to vote, supporting those who gave the vote to a party / candidate, and at the same time attention and care are concentrated on the undecided. In 2007, Dorina Guțu considered that "The parties that will understand the new social realities the fastest and will adapt their messages adequately will have the greatest chances of success. The explosive evolution of web 2.0 and the new technological and social realities require the identification as soon as possible of the differences that begins to appear inside the local polling stations, the re-evaluation of voting options considered traditional and the shaping of specific electoral profiles both online and offline" (Guțu, 2007: 105). It is obvious that the media is constantly changing, and the change irreparably influences the way campaigns and political communication are carried out.

From a financial point of view, online tools fall into two categories: (1) unpaid channels (also considered the main online channels) which are represented by website, email, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and (2) paid channels (or online advertising) which are represented by Google, Facebook, YouTube ads. Unpaid channels are free or paid for in very small amounts and are only effective when they have been running for a long time and already have a trained audience. In other words, they need a certain amount of time before they can create an audience, so they have to be exploited before the election campaigns, with variations depending on the specificity of each. It can shorten the duration only if they are related to online advertising. Websites are information platforms and the creation of a database of supporters, static and dependent on the number of visitors, with variable design and features that help both beneficiaries and users – simple, easy to access, adapted to mobile technology, with database management system, simplified communication with registered users, self-generated emails with optimized content and social media integration. The content of a political website informs users, redirects them to other media channels and contains information relevant and of interest to users, such as the biography or story of the candidate / party. Email is a complementary tool that depends on a previously formed database to become functional. It is a free tool, but used quite a bit, even when opening from a mobile phone. The YouTube channel has the advantage of the video channel, which is often more efficient than a channel that uses writing. Stream videos online, either professionally made videos, or PowerPoint running as a video, or amateur recordings. It is available to anyone and offers the possibility to correlate with other online (Facebook) and offline (TV) tools, so that the transferred material can reach many people. In order for a material distributed through this channel to be as effective as possible, it must convey a very clear political message, create emotion, capture the attention of the viewer so that the messages and campaign concepts are retained, built around the messages of the

candidate which has to be a real anchor for campaign messages and to use advertising techniques (the elements presented in the video to be associated by the viewer with aspects of his life). Other elements to keep in mind are the title (easy to find and suggestive to the target audience), tagging the videos (added keywords to highlight the content), the link to the website or to the Facebook page of the candidate or party (so that viewing / distribution continues on these channels), watermark (adding a button that involves displaying it over the video and links to the facebook page or another link to which voters are directed) (Campaign Manual, <http://manualdecampanie.ro/issue/campanie-electorala-online/>).

Regarding the creation of electoral campaigns on the Facebook platform, we can consider that we are already familiar with the techniques used. Lately, there has been an increase in the advertising of candidates, the shares that involve the development of a real campaign strategy in the desire to reach as many voters as possible, as well as the comments to the vast majority of political posts, comments that are more or less relevant and can be made by any Internet user. Electoral campaigns on Facebook are nothing new at this time, especially since for each campaign there are elements of novelty and improved political communication techniques. The Facebook platform has proven its usefulness in a number of roles, such as recruitment, mobilization, information, organization, advertising, communication, positioning, quick response. It is the channel where voters, and not only, interact with the organization, the candidate, the party or even the supporters. The campaign is structured and planned in advance, with a calendar of specific posts and adapted to current mobile technology. The political message is composed of both written text and image, and increases visibility for those who have interacted with specific content through like, share, comment. Increasing visibility is also done in cascade by amplifying a post with a specific content through other subsequent posts with similar content. Videos uploaded directly to the platform and embedded in posts are used for greater exposure.

Paid channels or online advertising are used both to support mainstream channels and as stand-alone tools. Google makes references to political sites through links, and Facebook ads come to support the materials posted on the platform - posts, pages or websites. A number of targeting criteria are used, and the materials are displayed to the right people or target groups. Sidebar ads send messages, recruit recruits, promote candidates' Facebook pages, increase the number of followers, redirect to an external page, while Timeline ads apply to organic content and are an important component in a strategy of online election campaigns. YouTube ads cover those who use this channel as a target audience (Campaign Manual, <http://manualdecampanie.ro/issue/campanie-electorala-online/>).

Online channels are not only used as a tool to convey the political message, but also allow analyzing voter feedback in real time and measuring visitor reactions through various measurement parameters – number of views, traffic at different time intervals, most visited pages, the locations of the visitors (important in the analysis of the urban versus the rural environment), the actions on the pages, the interactions, the number of people to whom the posts were displayed, but also the activity from the pages of the candidates or opposition parties.

As with traditional campaign methods and online, messages need to be constructed in such a way as to attract voters effectively. In order to achieve its ultimate goal, that of creating an emotional connection with the voter or a potential voter, political messages must be clear, short, credible, with important topics that create

Election campaign and political communication through social media

contrast, addressed to the target audience and constantly repeated. Although online election campaigns are popular and increasingly complex, we believe they have not reached their full potential for development.

Romania also knew the moment when social networks had the last word in the elections. Even though social media involvement in election campaigns has been felt since 2009, when local competitors used Facebook, Twitter, campaign sites, blogs, video-sharing sites and YouTube to convey their election messages, only in 2014 politicians became aware of the extraordinary potential of the online environment and the electoral pool that should not be bypassed by anyone. In this year's presidential election, social networks managed an impressive mobilization to go to the polls and turned a candidate with a second chance into a winner, practically turning failure into success. The online environment has been the main host of ideological struggles to attract young voters (Covaci, 2015: 90), who are known to have a low turnout, and to popularize the governing program. It was the time when traditional media networks were far surpassed by online platforms. Social media managed to unbalance a predictable order and have its last word in the election of the president, the effect being unexpected and impressive. In the electoral campaigns for the next elections, the Romanian candidates practically moved online, initiating direct communication with the voters and greatly diminishing the TV appearances both at national and local level. Their presence on social networks has become a strict necessity, and online has become the main part of strategies for election campaigns. With a great capacity for influence, social media has become necessary for politicians and voters alike. Due to the pandemic triggered by Covid19, the 2020 election year forced both parties and candidates, as well as voters to manifest mainly in the online environment. At this time, online election campaigns have become a habit for everyone, and the influence of the electoral masses can be made much easier through this tool due to the decrease in time. It can be considered that the electoral spectrum has been exceeded online, voters being seen as consumers of political offers. The addressability of politicians to the masses is easy, communication and interaction are permanent, the electorate is more educated, participatory, informed and much more demanding than when only traditional campaign techniques were used (Bărbieru, 2020a: 135-137).

In the face of new realities, new-type politicians are forced to be more humane in the eyes of voters, less rigid and more flexible. And the local electorate has changed, becoming much more demanding, more attentive to everything around it, including political life, and more eager for interaction and debate. The political messages, being general or niche, adapted to the moment for the loyalty of the target audience, also underwent changes. Targeting is used by all Romanian politicians, so they adapt their messages to groups of voters – women, the elderly, students, etc. – and uses targeted advertising. On the other hand, election campaigns are influenced by every news item in the online environment, whether it is true or false, making it increasingly difficult for voters to differentiate. Thus, out of the desire to capture attention, bombastic and fake new titles appear taken over and shared without prior documentation. The advantage is that negative news can be combated immediately, even in real time. At the same time, through online political communication and thanks to the internet-consuming public, but without too many political passions, politicians were forced to weigh their speech, to nuance it and to be very attentive to the messages transmitted, given that they are disseminated quickly and are very easily taken over by the traditional media.

In conclusion, we note that an unsuccessful candidate or party cannot yet win elections only through online communication, but this tool can propel a candidate or a party quite a bit. In this sense, we are particularly struck by the performance of the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) party in the parliamentary elections in Romania, in December 2020, a new political party that managed through online techniques (traditional techniques were very little visible) to obtain a score over other parliamentary parties (PMP, PRO Romania) and obtain seats in an unexpected way. Without benefiting from large sums of money for sponsorships, AUR took full advantage of the election campaign and online political communication. They only used smart targeting of the public, more radical software and political messages: "We cultivated our own bubble. We targeted the ads, they are public information that Facebook provides. ... We used targeting and advertising to those who interacted with our posts. We went by quantity, not micro targeting. Every day we had a video made professionally, which fit in the times of Facebook, meaning to be short enough", said one of the leaders of the party after the election (Popescu, December 2020). These results, as well as the previous ones from the key moments, make us understand the major importance of social media in politics, its role as the main channel of political communication and the special place within the electoral campaign strategies. The Covid-19 pandemic supports this conclusion, showing us in the 2020 election year that an election campaign can take place in a very large percentage in the online environment, with its limits and advantages. Under these conditions, the future places social media in the first place among electoral instruments and in campaign strategies.

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Election campaign and political communication through social media

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