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New Media and Social Media in the Political Communication

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Abstract: This study presents the 2009 Romanian presidential elections and the way in which the candidates interacted with the new communication technologies. After the first research conducted on the 2004 online electoral campaigns, we noticed that, in Romania, the degree of alphabetization and political participation (the number of people knowing how to read and write, or the number of those effectively participating at the poll) is just as small as it was after the mass internet was introduced and after the number of internet subscribers increased. We observed that the websites and blogs with the highest traffic are the entertainment dedicated ones, the tabloids, and not the cultural ones, not the quality online press. This research intends to clear up whether in Romania social media are rather helping the moderate candidates or the extremist candidates – from an electoral point of view. This article will be incorporated in the research called *Electoral Communication in Romania after 1989. Old and New Technologies in Presidential Campaigns* which is part of the post-doctoral program POSDRU/89/1.5/S/62259, *Socio-human and political applied sciences. Post-doctoral training program and post-doctoral research scholarships in the field of the socio-human and political sciences.*

Keywords: elections; presidential; participation; online; Facebook

1. Introduction

Is technology transforming us culturally or is technology transformed according to the culture of those who use it? The answer to these questions divides the researchers into two categories: Marshall McLuhan's supporters, who believe that the new communication techniques are influencing the social environment; and the critics of McLuhan's theory, who think that this influence is insignificant.

Related to the new media, there is an optimistic ideology of the web 2.0 participation. The authors embracing it proclaim that internet offers quick access to information, pluralism of ideas on the open market, the possibility to contest power, and confers a critical perspective to the citizen. The researchers who are optimistic about web 2.0 talk about the citizen journalism that is manifesting on the blogs and forums, and about the good intentions that the creators of the virtual worlds and online communities have. Their observations lead them to the optimist conclusion regarding the social, economical and cultural benefits of internet.

There is also a pessimistic ideology that criticizes internet, reproaching that it doesn't democratize the society and claiming that in reality it offers a fake freedom of expression and a fake participation form, misleading the public into thinking they have power, and therefore building a fake democracy. The critics of web 2.0' participation ask themselves to which extent do social media contribute to the

liberalization of the political regime, to the human rights defense, to the civic education and to the development of the open civil society. From this perspective, new media and web 2.0 represent the new technologies that deceive people by giving them the illusion of pluralism, freedom of expression and of criticizing, when in fact they do not ensure a real or accurate representation of the civil society opinions, or a real power for the users.

2. Theoretical Considerations

Before engaging in the post-doctoral project, the author of this research was positioned closer to the optimistic vision on the new technologies (the ideology of participation through web 2.0). In chapter *An introduction in the online radio* from the *Journalism manual* (Coman, 2009, pp. 678-685), I was considering that the internet user – through his social-civic involvement, through free critics posted on the blog or on the web platform of the online radio, through the community he creates and in which he actively engages – transforms into a journalist-citizen and, thus, reacts to the political power abuses or to the breach of power separation, mobilizes and protests collectively. One of the disadvantages of communicating and transmitting public interest information through personal blogs and not through the official blogs and website of the mass-media institutions consists in the absence of gate-keepers. In case of the personal blog, we observe that the blogger does not necessarily respect the basic journalistic criteria for selection, editing or checking the information. The internet user and blog owner is a self-proclaimed journalist, although he doesn't have a degree for this, he doesn't belong to any media institution, nor is he recognized by the guild. After conducting the research on the 2004 online electoral campaign (Momoc, 2010, pp. 89-99) and after analyzing the online digital guerilla campaign of the candidate Traian Băsescu, I've noticed that in Romania the degree of political participation (the number of those who effectively take part at the poll) remained small after the internet became widely popular and after the number of internet subscribers increased.

Sorin Tudor (2008, p. 152) was observing that, according to the Internet World Stats in March 2008, Romania had 12 million internet users. A spectacular growth compared to August 2007, when the same statistics showed a little over 5 million users (in November 2007, 7 million were already counted). According to the demographic statistics Trafic.ro offered, two thirds of the Romanian internet user are over 18 years old. This translates into 9 million users having the right to vote: 49% of all the voters are online. A virtual electoral pool that the politicians couldn't have missed. But an electoral pool that is disappointed by the politicians: in July 2008 the over 350 political websites monitored by Trafic.ro gathered together only 587.658 unique visitors, while, as comparison, in the same period Evenimentul Zilei newspaper website alone gathered 666.258 unique visitors. The voters' disappointment reflects their real-life disgust into the online environment (Tudor, 2008).

By monitoring the 2004 electoral campaign, I wanted to answer the question whether internet users are interested in getting information about the candidates and their platform, or are more interested in making the politicians look funny and ridiculous. The finding is similar to the results of some previous studies: people who participate on the political blogs, on the discussion forums or on video sharing websites want to laugh at the politicians, to contribute to the negative campaign, to attack politicians they do not sympathize: "Internet turned the electoral campaign into a national peal of laughter" (Tudor, p. 150). We observed that the websites and blogs with the highest traffic are the entertainment dedicated ones, the tabloids, and not the cultural ones, not the quality online press. Internet users are more interested in having fun online or searching for information than in enriching their culture. During the electoral campaign, the internet users are less interested in obtaining information regarding

the candidates' political programs and are rather into having fun on the account of the politicians. The participants at the political blogs, discussion forums, or video sharing websites want to mock the politicians, conduct negative campaigns and attack the candidates they dislike.

3. Research Objectives

To explain to which extent do social or cultural benefits emerge as outcome of using the internet, I've asked myself what kind of information are internet users looking for, what are the websites with the highest traffic? Are internet users interested rather into having fun online or into getting informed? If the politicians' target audiences are or aren't present on the political websites, will the candidate-politicians follow their audiences on the social networks?

4. The Hypothesis

The pretext of the post-doctoral research entitled *Electoral Communication in Romania after 1989. Old and New Technologies in Presidential Campaigns* consists in an observation that I made in Dilema Veche (Momoc, 2006, p. 12), when I was noticing the small degree of attention that the political parties are giving to the online communication. After monitoring the political parties' websites in 2006, I was then reaching the conclusion that the right wing populist leaders, Corneliu Vadim Tudor and George Becali, through their online platforms were sensing the importance of using web 2.0 as an instrument for engaging the internet user. The hypothesis for my post-doctoral research is checking the presupposition on whether the populist parties/candidates are more attentive to the new communication technologies during the Romanian presidential elections. The hereby research determines whether the politicians who ran for the 2009 presidential elections have accounts on the social networks and if they use these accounts for interacting with their audiences. The hypothesis is that politicians with populist message will be more attentive and open to using social networks than the others.

5. Research Results

5.1. Social networks versus general news websites

At the "General" category on Trafic.ro, the first most visited websites are not those of information, but the social networks and the entertainment user generated content websites. The order in the first week of March 2011 was: hi5, trilulilu, softpedia, sport.ro, cancan.ro, okazii.ro, gsp.ro, 220.ro, libertatea.ro, stirileprotv.ro. The same order was kept after March, during the first half of 2011. In the week of April 18th-24th, the order at the "General" category on Trafic.ro was the following, in terms of unique visitors: hi5.com, trilulilu.ro, sport.ro, okazii.ro, cancan.ro, softpedia.com, libertatea.ro, gsp.ro, 220.ro, a1.ro.

According to Trafic.ro, in the week of March 7th-13th 2011, the most visited political websites counted approximately 11 thousand unique visitors, while the entertainment or video sharing websites had over 750 thousand unique visitors. At the "Politics" category, the top website, Inpolitics.ro, had 11.182 unique visitors, while at the "Entertainment" category, 220.ro (the top website) had 765.909 unique visitors. In the week of April 18th-24th 2011, at the "Politics" category the top website, Inpolitics.ro, had 8.675 unique visitors, while at the "Entertainment" category, 220.ro (the top website) had 661.954

unique visitors. At the “Social networks” category in the Online Audience and Traffic Research, <http://www.sati.ro>, in the week of March 7th-13th the top website, hi5.com, had 1.500.809 unique visitors, and in the week of April 18th-24th 2011 the first is again taken by hi5.com, with 1.244.315 unique visitors.

In the Online Audience and Traffic Research, at the “General news” category, in the week of March 7th-13th 2011 the order based on unique visitors was: stirileprotv.ro – 742.336, adevarul.ro – 671.663, realitatea.net – 652.711, ziare.com – 615.235, antena3.ro – 563.050, gandul.info – 557.353, a1.ro – 552.876. On sati.ro, at the same category, in the week of April 18th-24th 2011, the order based on unique visitors was: a1.ro – 547.959, stirileprotv.ro – 534.892, adevarul.ro – 515.046, realitatea.net – 512.766, gandul.info – 489.353. Despite the growth of cultural information consumption on the internet, the consumption of tabloid stories, utilitarian information and social networks is growing much faster. The advantage of internet is that it offers access to cultural products free of charge or much cheaper than other media. The number of those interested in online culture is – just as in the offline – much smaller than of those who are interested in ordinary or entertainment products. Even if the electors aren’t able to find models among the politicians, whom they don’t find credible, the politicians will try to target the audiences present in the social networks. Starting from this hypothesis, I have monitored the 2009 Romanian presidential elections and the way in which the candidates interacted with the social networks. In 2009 the most used online channels in the presidential campaign were the blogs, video-sharing websites and social networks (the latter being only at their debut). Facebook was also used earlier, in the 2008 local elections. However, the candidates who used social media (Facebook) and who benefited of an impressive number of visitors on their blog were not the ones who won the elections. 2009 represents the first Romanian presidential campaign in which Facebook was used.

5.2. The Facebook presence of the candidates who ran for the 2009 presidential elections

During the 2009 presidential elections, Facebook was not a platform with electoral stake. According to Titus Blog¹ – a blogger who bought advertising space on Facebook during that period and who received the data from the owner of the social network – in September 2009 Facebook looked as follows: 270.540 accounts originating in Romania, which meant 1,3% of the country’s population, considering as base the 21,5 million inhabitants population. In November, the Facebook accounts grew to 414.000 users. According to the Facebook Pages Monitoring Service in Romania, [Facebrands.ro](http://facebrands.ro), on January 1st 2010 there were only 518.140 Facebook users, while on January 1st 2011 their number reached 2.405.920.

On April 30th 2011, the number of Facebook users grew to 3.247.280 users, according to [Facebrands.ro](http://facebrands.ro). This equaled 15,13% of the total population and 44,5% of the total internet users. 16,1% are aged between 13-17 years and do not have the right to vote. The rest of users who have the right to vote are split as follows: 33, 9% are aged between 18-24 years, 31,2% are aged between 25-34 years, 12, 5% are aged between 35-44 years, 3,8% are aged between 45-54 years, 1,7% are aged between 55-64 years, 0,8% are aged over 65 years.

In the general classification, of 13 thousand enlisted pages, on April 30th 2011 the Facebook page of the pop artist Inna was on the leading place with 2.568.978 fans, followed by Akcent with 388. 467 fans, Edward Maya with 331.137 fans, KissFM with 288.320 fans, Creative Monkeyz with 261.540

¹ <http://www.titusblog.net/2009/09/facebook-sare-de-300-000-de-utilizatori-romani/>

fans, Radio Zu with 257.961 fans, Smiley with 210.693 fans, Cronica Cârcotașilor with 205.214 fans, Romania with 172.122 fans, Bancuri/Jokes with 163.314 fans. At the “Politics” category, out of 63 enlisted pages, on April 30th 2011 the leading political page belonged to Remus Cernea with 28.890 fans, followed by Crin Antonescu with 17.924 fans, Elena Udrea with 14.960 fans, Mișcarea Verzilor/Greens’ Movement with 12.083 fans, Partidul Verde/Green Party with 7.929 fans, Mircea Geoană with 4.420 fans, PNL/National Liberal Party with 3.291 fans, Urban Iulian with 3.057 fans, Sorin Oprescu with 2.486 fans, Victor Ponta with 2.418 fans and Adrian Năstase with 1986 fans.

At the “General news” category, the leading Facebook page belonged to Adevărul with 28.606 fans, followed by Mediafax with 25.373 fans and Apropo.ro with 22.860 fans.

5.3. Personal Accounts and Facebook Pages of the Candidates at the 2009 Presidential Elections

The maximum number of friends that a personal Facebook account can reach is 5000. This is why some candidate-politicians chose to create a Facebook page, as the page doesn’t limit the number of likes they can receive. In April 2011, I’ve monitored the Facebook accounts of the 12 candidates from the 2009 presidential elections and gathered the following data:

Candidates George Becali (PNG) and Constantin Ninel Potarca (independent) do not have a Facebook account or page. Corneliu Vadim Tudor (PRM) has a personal Facebook account since November 22nd 2010. On April 30th 2011, Vadim Tudor’s Facebook page summed up 531 likes and on his personal account, he had 325 friends.

Eduard Manole (independent) had a single Facebook post during the 2009 electoral campaign. On April 30th 2011, he had 94 friends. Constantin Rotaru (Alianța Socialistă) did not have a Facebook account in November 2009. He opened one in May 2010. On April 30th 2011, he had 270 friends. Ovidiu Iane (PER) had 164 friends on his personal account on April 30th 2011. During the electoral month of November 2009 he wrote 4 posts on Facebook. Kelemen Hunor (UDMR) had 3972 friends on his Facebook account on April 30th 2011.

Mircea Geoană (PSD) had 77 posts on his Facebook page in October-November 2009. On April 4th 2011, Geoană’s Facebook page had 4.350 likes. On April 11th 2011, he had 4.368 likes. On April 18th 2011, he had 4.382 likes. On April 30th 2011, Geoană reached 4.420 fans on his Facebook page. On his personal Facebook account, Mircea Geoană had 4985 friends.

Crin Antonescu (PNL) had 103 posts on his Facebook page in October-November 2009. On April 8th 2011, Antonescu had 17.451 likes on his Facebook page. On April 30th 2011, 17.924 fans gave likes to his page. On Facebook there are more personal accounts created under the name of Crin Antonescu and it is quite difficult to identify which one is actually the liberal politician’s account.

In only a few weeks of online campaign, Remus Cernea, the Green Party candidate, gathered 5700 supporters on Facebook, almost 2000 friends on hi5 and over 1000 followers on Twitter. During the electoral campaign in October-November 2009, he wrote 58 posts on Facebook. A high number of internet users visited www.remuscernea.ro and the website stayed on the first place at the “Politics” category on Trafic.ro for two consecutive weeks, summing up 87.370 visits in November. The Green Party candidate was voted by 0,6% of the electors. Crin Antonescu and Remus Cernea had a bigger number of fans on Facebook than Mircea Geoană did, but only the last one made it in the second ballot.

The Facebook account or page of candidate Traian Băsescu could not be found.

6. Conclusions

In 2009, the social networks weren't as visited by the Romanian internet users as they got to be in 2011. Facebook grew from 414.000 users in November 2009 to 2.405.920 users on January 1st 2011 and on April 30th 2011 the number of Facebook users reached 3.247.280.

Facebook (social media, generally speaking) seems to be a communication channel that will be used for sending political messages, once established that that is where the candidates' audience is. The question is: by targeting that audience online, are there any chances that the politician attracts people to the poll with the help of internet? Does this apply if the candidate isn't a credible and coherent politician in the offline environment? The author of the post-doctoral research does not enroll in the optimists' category, who see in the internet (in new media and, more recently, in social-media) a communication technology that changes mentalities, makes civic education, engages people to participate politically, and builds democracy. This is contradicted by the fact that the number of people getting involved politically or attending the poll is constantly decreasing. According to the Central Electoral Bureau, at the 2009 presidential elections 9.946.748 people voted out of the total number of voters, 18.293.277, so only 51% of the citizens having the right to vote participated. At the elections on May 20th 1990 over 80% of the voters participated; out of 17.200.722 enlisted electors, 14.826.616 showed up at the poll. At the legislative elections on September 27th 1992 the electors' lists summed up 16.380.663 citizens, of whom 12.496.430 showed up at the poll, meaning 76,3% of the total electors; although lower than at the first elections, the citizens' participation at the vote was high. At the parliamentary elections in November 1996, out of 17.218.654 enlisted electors, 12.238.746 showed up at the poll and voted correctly for the Chamber of Deputies, and 12.287.671 voted for the Senate, thus reaching a real participation rate of over 71% of the electoral population (Voicu, 1998, pp. 214-229). After 2000, the general elections participation at the vote continued to be on a descendent trend. The lack of activism in the public space, non-participation and indifference are effects of the Romanian political regime crisis and of the way in which civil society understands to approach this crisis. The common citizen's suspicion regarding the politicians' good faith, the loss of interest for expressing one's vote, ignoring the public debate on institutions and politics endangers the foundation of the representative democracy.

We do not enroll either in the pessimists' category, who state that Facebook and other social networks give users the illusion of political power and participation, or nourish the illusion that society is democratizing, hiding in fact the techno-populism. We observe that there is interest from the populist candidates for the new technologies and for communicating with the alternative audiences, who can be found on the social networks. In a future study I shall present the number of posts that each of the presidential candidates had on his personal Facebook account during the presidential elections (October-November 2009), what were the links that were indicated in the status posts and the number of likes received from the fans for each of the posts. I have conducted a similar analysis on the Twitter accounts of the all presidential candidates.

We shall also present in future analysis the communication on Youtube of the 12 presidential candidates in 2009, referring to: the types of electoral video-clips they uploaded, whether the attitude the candidate conveyed through the video-sharing channel was negative or positive, the image each candidate promoted on Youtube. The meaning of the post-doctoral research is to clear up whether in Romania the online communication helps, from an electoral perspective, rather the democratic/moderate or the populist/extremist candidates to win sympathy, trust and votes, as well as

if these candidates premeditate the use of this channel when they develop their media plan. As consequence, the semi-structured interviews will be conducted on candidates and consultants, not on voters.

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