

Online Communication for Electoral Purposes: a View on Political Practices in Timis County

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Abstract: *The paper aims to present instances of political communication during electoral processes carried out with new media tools. The high rate of Internet penetration and the spreading of social networks triggered the response on the part of political candidates, interested to reach their publics wherever possible. In addition, the development of e-democracy, e-governance and e-politics naturally produces effects in electoral processes. The 2012 parliamentary elections in Romania have as distinctive features the breakdown of constituencies into smaller units and the uninominal vote instead of the previously employed party lists. These features placed the burden of communication tasks on individual candidates, who had to resort to at least one web based communication channel during the campaign. The article is structured in five sections, as follows: the first section is dedicated to presenting the context and tools of the study. The second section views the digital communication as the new frontier to conquer for political communicators. The third is dedicated to Romanian politicians and their Internet presence. The fourth section, which is the largest, places the 2012 parliamentary elections in Timis County under the microscope and highlights the choices of communication tools preferred by the candidates coming from the two political alliances that dominated the elections, the Social Liberal Union (USL) and the Right Romania Alliance (ARD). Finally, the concluding sections discuss further research to be carried in understanding how digital technologies shape the pillar of political communication in the years to come.*

Keywords: online communication; electoral campaign; social media; interactivity.

Cuvinte-cheie: comunica online; campanii electorale; social media; interactivitate.

Introduction

Political communication is a key factor for creating the link between politicians and their publics of choice. On a day-to-day basis, politicians communicate mainly in the controlled environment of the political arena: within the party followers or members, or in contradiction with their political opponents. The electoral processes increase exponentially the necessity of communication – with persuasive or only informative purposes –, and this particular instance of political communication type elicits special interest. Social sciences, politology, communication sciences, linguistics – with discourse analysis –, look into the recipes for success, while practitioners – politicians, political advisors, political PR practitioners, advertisers – try, intu-

itively or knowledgeably, to catch the attention and to gain the understanding and sympathy of the electorate. This study is based on a communication sciences approach to the topic of electoral communication, bringing to attention a case study analysis of electoral communication based on new media channels, in Timis County, in the West part of Romania. Most analyses focus on major political players, such as presidents – ranging from candidates to presidency in the United States of America, who were the first to use new media channels, up to European or domestic ones, Romania included –, or candidates in Capital cities. We focus, however, on micro-politics, still of national relevance, since the analyzed candidates run for a national parliamentary office, but on a particular territory, Timis County, an area peripheral to the decisi-

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on-making center, but with a symbolic value for its role in recent politics and famous for its appetite to experiment and incorporate novelty in all areas of social activity. The aim of the study is to highlight the salient features of political communication in the 2012 electoral campaign in the selected area and to discern which aspects of new media communication technologies are more likely to become part of political style for Romanian politicians, thus anticipating the electoral campaign strategies in the next electoral cycles. Depending on the penetration of the virtual political field, analysts of (political) communication can develop new instruments for following, recording, and documenting the efficiency of such campaigns, whether by contrast to direct communication strategies, or in the context of the Romanian political style relating to global practices in communication.

The paper starts with a brief presentation of the political uses of the Internet in Romanian practice, followed by the analysis of the online presence of Timis candidates to parliamentary offices in 2012, based on direct observation and on results provided by such platforms like Facebooks and Zelist Monitor. Finally, the study highlights possible trends and further uses of new media channels in Romanian electoral communication strategies.

Digital communication – the new frontier

Understanding the need to reach the public in their communicational medium, politicians and their advisors develop a 360° radius of channels, sending messages to potential receivers in all possible forms of human communication: direct utterance, print, audio, video, multimedia channels. The digital revolution created new possibilities for carrying the political message, via SMS texting, but also through the social networks: Facebook, Twitter, Google+, Pinterest, Instagram, blogs. Andrew Chadwick and Philip Howard (Routledge, 2009) consider that after 2008, the Internet entered in the *postmaturity phase*, tracing back the first incorporation of the

Internet platforms in electoral campaigns to the year 1996. According to these authors, in their authoritative *The Routledge Book of Internet Politics*, the debut of online political communication resorted to candidates' website of the nowadays web 1.0 generation. The sites in this pioneer stage offered online versions of electoral leaflets or brochures, merely speaking to the public, without allowing interaction. The *maturity stage* began, for American politicians, in 2000, and the elections for Congress in 2006 together with the presidential elections in 2008 took the Internet-based political communication in the postmaturity stage. Each electoral campaign had its new element in terms of communication technologies, Barack Obama successfully using a digital communication: mix Online Search & Display Ads, Social media, new media & Widgets Hub Twitter, Blackberry/mobile compatible site LinkedIn, Facebook, Youtube, Slideshare Email Marketing (Rozenoer, 2010). His success in triggering electoral interest among the typically inert young voters became the case study of numerous papers and even recommended model for marketing strategizing.

The technology is available, the platforms are (at least apparently) free and the public shifts from traditional media to virtual worlds and develops new habits of handling all types of information. As Paul Levinson signaled as early as 1998 in his book *Marshall McLuhan in the digital era* (Romanian version, 2001), the digital revolution turned upside down the traditional media models, reinvesting communication with power and magic. There is an extensive literature on Mediamorphosis (Fidler, 2004) and on the exponentially growing number of applications of digital technologies that populate contemporary world. This paper aims to remain anchored in the documented communication practices of candidates in the parliamentary elections of 2012 in Romania, acknowledging that further studies can focus on other aspects of the topic, such as the content of political communication, the impact of new media on democratic processes or the reactions of the public to digital political communication. Instead, we prefer to

analyze the repertoire of means of communication in fashion for the elections of 2012, relying on direct observation, applications developed by Facebrands PRO and analysis of the new media tools in use.

There are many reasons for incorporating online and digital channels into political campaigns. According to technology enthusiasts, one cannot escape the digital government (West, 2005), digital formations (Latham and Sassen, 2005), and democracy can be saved in globalization times due to e-democracy (Della Porta, 2013). According to international legislative provisions, online communication is the new realm to conquer. It seems less regulated in content, more democratic and comprehensive in terms of production and delivery of messages and better fit to resonate with the lifestyles of contemporary society. Its possibilities are championed by authors like Don Tapscott (2011), Anthony Williams (2010), James Surowiecki (2011) – to name only a few of the influential authors recently translated into Romanian. On one hand, the Internet may be perceived as “enhancing political involvement and debate” (Chadwick and Howard, 2009, 198), on the other, it is the home of communication networks that impose their own set of rules for information flows and presuppose the understanding of “lex informatica” (Katzenbach, 2012, 126) established in the virtual world. Online political communication can be perceived as a tribute to fashion, but it is also enforced by global concerns regarding, for instance, a new wave of rights, digital rights. During the elections for the European Parliament of 2014, for instance, online activists demanded political candidates to support publicly digital democracy and to commit to promoting e-democracy, an action vividly promoted by the European Digital Rights movement, registered in Brussels (<http://edri.org>).

Romanian politicians and the Internet

Romanian politicians embraced blogs and websites have been as soon as 2000. The amount

of online political discourse grew significantly to allow for in-depth analysis of Romanian political blogosphere (Tudor, 2008; Guțu-Tudor, 2008). Closer to the investigated period, a study carried out by the Romanian *Asociația pentru Tehnologie și Internet*, together with Standout and Facebrands, in March 2010, entitled *Romanian parliamentarians on the Internet*, presented an overview of Romanian e-democracy in action. Out of 463 parliamentarians, 45.79% had a web page or a blog. However, only 48.58% of the online presence of these politicians were up-to-date. In 2012, the same study shows that 24.41% of the parliamentarians had a Facebook account and even less, 9.72%, used Twitter for communicating political content.

In the analyzed territory, Timis County, according to facebrands.ro, 70% of the population uses the Internet for various purposes, two out of three inhabitants of this county being frequent users of at least one online communication tool. Also in 2012, Facebook accounts in Timis County raised to 275,000, the vast majority belonging to residents of the capital city, Timisoara (232,000 in 2012, 260,000 in 2014). As the *Routledge Handbook...* eloquently states, “once Internet penetration reaches some kind of critical mass (whatever that may be) a decisive political impact somehow becomes inevitable” (2009, 56).

In previous campaigns, the task for electoral messages laid with the political organization of the candidates, since Romanian parliamentary elections were organized on party lists in the period 1990-2008, and constituencies coincided with the territory of counties. Web pages, leaflets, posters, rallies – all elements of campaigning used to be organized and financed in a pool fashion, for the whole list of candidates of a given party. Televised debates provided the main opportunities for clarifying topics and platforms of the candidates to a wider public, and actual kiosks for distributing leaflets, brochures and other electoral campaign materials were put in place (Dragan et al., 1998; Cernicova and Buca, 2000).

The elections of 2012 brought an enormous change in the electoral process: candidates ran for given constituencies, carefully designed

according to geographic and demographic criteria. Thus, in Timis county candidates had to run in one of the four constituencies for the Senate or in one of the ten constituencies for the Deputy Chamber, no longer by party lists, but individually, even if under the banner of a political party or alliance. Therefore, the task of communicating with the electorate resided with the candidate, and not with the political party organizations. Such a change of the rules of engagement raises the research interest regarding the communication style embraced by different candidates. With an electoral environment prepared to absorb the online dimension, and with new responsibilities on the part of candidates and their staffs to communicate with the electorate, it only naturally follows that lessons are to be learned for future political processes.

Out of the 73 candidates registered for the 14 positions of Timis representatives in the Romanian Legislative body, 28 represented the main political alliances which ultimately gained the majority of seats: The Social Liberal Union (Uniunea Social-Liberală – USL) and the Right Romania Alliance (Alianța România Dreaptă – ARD) (www.becparlamentare2012.ro/candidati.html). We selected 10 candidates for the analysis, five from each alliance (ARD: Ovidiu Ciuhandu, Vasile Blaga, Mihai Bojin, Marin Popescu, Alain Florin Rus, and for USL: Sorin Grindeanu, Matei Suci, Ion Răducanu, Petru Andea and Sorin Stragea), to closely follow the extent and intensity of new media electoral communication. In order to measure the candidates' presence in new media we established as a scale the following: 1 up to 3 activities – low frequency; 4 up to 8 activities – medium frequency; over 9 activities – high frequency. For the purpose of the present paper we present the corpus of ten candidates quantitatively and two of the candidates in detail. We selected one politician from each alliance, by the criterion of their success in obtaining a mandate in the Parliament: Sorin Grindeanu (USL) and Vasile Blaga (ARD), the latter due to the principle of proportionality giving the opposition a bonus in order to ensure representation in the legislative body.

We extend our gratitude to Petru Cojocaru from TVT'89, who helped us keep track of the online activities of these candidates and provided insights into the combination of the various communication channels employed by politicians during the campaign of 2012 in Timis County.

Results and discussion on the new media presence of Timis candidates in 2012

At the time of parliamentary elections from 2012 Sorin Grindeanu was the executive president of the Social-Democratic Party – Timis County branch and vice-mayor of Timisoara. A relatively young politician of 41, Grindeanu had also the advantage of running for office in the big urban area of Timisoara, therefore communicating with the help of new media tools came natural and according to the penetration of technology in society. He chose to use Facebook, Twitter and Youtube. In addition to this, he also developed a personal website, *soringrindeanu.ro* and an electoral website, *dareusim.ro* (the latter deriving from his slogan *Da, reusim/Yes, we shall succeed.*). A skilled politician, he created a personal Facebook account almost two years before the campaign, in January 2011, and reached the maximum of friends allowed by the platform, 5,000. In terms of tools used for electoral purposes, a synthetic image shows that:

Table 1: Tools employed by the candidate Sorin

Grindeanu		
Communication tool	Frequency during elections (2012)	Updates after elections (2013)
Facebook (official)	-	-
Facebook (personal)	high	Up-to-date
Twitter	low	abandoned
Youtube	medium	abandoned
Blog	-	-

As far as the Facebook account is concerned, Grindeanu succeeded to gain 500 new friends during the campaign. In the *Likes* section, he posted notes from different areas, connected with the party campaign: Matei Suciu (another candidate from USL Timis), the page *Da, reusim* (his main campaign theme), Victor Ponta (the party president on the national level). The high activity during the campaign brought fresh updates in a timely manner.

Table 2: *Result of social media campaign for Sorin Grindeanu*

Number of notes	72
Appreciations	3,515
Comments	501
Shares	634
Overall interactions (sum)	5,354

Sorin Grindeanu used only one *tweet* throughout his campaign, to announce the launching of his personal website soringrindeanu.ro, and to invite visitors to contact him on the INTERACTIV section. The Youtube channel has been created and hosts 13 video clips, 12 from traditional television appearances and one electoral spot. They did not stir comments, although they generated 425 visits.

The most intensively used channel was the personal site, with sections regarding the constituency (*Colegiul 2*) and the issues raised by electors during campaign meetings, the political project, events, profile and photo/video accompanying the campaign. The candidate elicits reactions from visitors regarding his political project.

Vasile Blaga, from ARD, aged 56, came to the campaign from the position of an “oldtimer” in the Parliament, former minister and acting president of the main political party at the time, the Democratic Liberal Party. Although enjoying high public visibility, Blaga entered the parliamentary race of 2012 with a handicap. He did not reside in the constituency, so he had to

rely more on mediated communication than his colleagues from the territory. His choice of tools proved to be more limited: Facebook and personal site only, the latter under a title not linked to his name, thus making it less visible for outsiders. Behaving like a top party leader, however, Blaga made sure to provide on his platforms links to the official party materials (video material, pages, etc.). Concisely, Blaga used the following tools:

Table 3: *Tools employed by the candidate Vasile Blaga*

Communication tool	Frequency during elections (2012)	Updates after elections (2013)
Facebook (official)	-	-
Facebook (personal)	high	Up-to-date
Twitter	-	-
Youtube	-	-
Blog	-	-

The Facebook account was established the next date after the debut of the electoral campaign and during it this page generated 1,516 friend, and 400 more in the post-electoral period (December 2012). Although the page attracted 900 likes, 187 comments from other users and around 300 shares, the candidate did not use his account to respond and engage in dialogue with his visitors. His site is also a closed one, only friends being allowed to post notes, photos or video material. Blaga proposed three discussion groups, to his party (PDL), the party section abroad (diaspora) and the political alliance. His page is not registered in the Facebrands.ro database, therefore some of the comparisons are difficult to make.

Table 4: *Result of social media campaign for Vasile Blaga*

Number of notes	15
Appreciations	Approx. 900
Comments	187

Shares	Approx. 300
Overall interactions (sum)	Approx. 1,387

For a website platform, Vasile Blaga shared with Traian Ungureanu the privilege of administrators for <http://ard.userecho.com>, allowing only platform-registered users to interact with them and pose to questions. However, the site allowed for RSS news subscriptions and offered links to the alliance's Facebook account, <https://ro-ro.facebook.com/ARD.TV>. This collective account recreated the memory of party efforts to sustain candidates, a distinctive communication feature of the previous electoral campaigns (1990, 1992, 1996, 2000, 2004 and 2008).

On looking at the selected corpus of politicians, we could see that all of them resorted to Facebook accounts. Two candidates used personal sites (with their names as identifiers, Mihai Bojin, ARD, and Sorin Grindeanu, USL), two used blogs (Ovidiu Ciuhandu, ARD and Ion Raducanu, USL), two used the Twitter (without consistency, though: O. Ciuhandu, ARD, S. Grindeanu, USL) and three used Youtube channel possibilities (O. Ciuhandu, ARD, S. Grindeanu and I. Raducanu, USL). As for overall interactions, the application provided by Facebrands Pro allowed for a comparison, considering interactions to be the function of the candidates' site to notify "friends" each time a new message is posted, but also the visitors' interventions or cross-posting on personal walls:

Table 5: *Candidates' interactions on the personal site during the 2012 campaign*

Ovidiu Ciuhandu (ARD)	274
Vasile Blaga (ARD)	1,387
Mihai Bojin (ARD)	140
Marin Popescu (ARD)	274
Alain Rus (ARD)	624
Sorin Grindeanu (USL)	5,354
Matei Suciu(USL)	1,949
Ion Raducanu (USL)	2,294
Petru Andea (USL)	830
Sorin Stragea (USL)	974

Out of the group, all the five candidates from

the Social-Democratic Union gained a mandate in the Parliament, while from the Alliance Right Romania only Vasile Blaga was successful. Although communication skills and electoral success cannot be necessarily tied together, it is obvious from the above table that the Social Liberal Union used interactions in the virtual world more intensively and displayed higher mastering of new media tools. Personal observation showed that candidates relied more on direct communication with the electorate, with visits, rallies, events aimed at targeting the population from the selected constituency. Candidates and their staff chose to rely more on the hard core electorate, middle aged or older – prone to consider that a candidate is worth the vote only if personal contact is made, than on the young generation, which prefers new media interactions. On the other hand, all politicians used what Ulmanu calls "take-the-votes-and-disappear" technique (Humanitas, 2011), namely, after a vivid online campaign, with messages tailored to meet the requirements of new media (friendly tone, personal interaction, high frequency of posts), most politicians withdrew from the virtual medium. In 2013, the personal sites were kept active, but in 2014 new posts cannot be identified.

The conclusions of the study trace the degree of new media communications for electoral purposes to be in the maturity phase, in the terms described by the *Routledge Handbook of Internet Politics*, since all Romanian candidates from the selected field of research employed at least one of the tools for making their presence visible. However, even if tempted by the variety of tools anchored in the online platforms, candidates and their staff lost momentum and abandoned along the way some of the initially announced possibilities of keeping the public informed, such as Twitter and blog. On the other hand, the experience of by-passing mass media channels and communicating directly with the electorate is capitalized by politicians and political advisors, and already in the 2014 European Parliamentary elections many candidates developing web pages with their names as identifiers.

Conclusions: towards the deepening of research on political communication via new media

New challenges arising from communication revolution are manifold and widespread in the research regarding political communication during electoral campaigns. The theoretical and empirical current research focuses mainly on presidential campaigns worldwide, often by comparison to the elections in USA, leaders in innovating the style of political communication and in bringing in the latest elements of technological support. Due to the globalization of communication technology and the high penetration of Internet worldwide, communication strategies via new media spread rapidly, either due to mimicry and fashion, or to the understanding that the public has new expectations regarding information flows in the digital era. Our research focused on a peripheral territory, rather than on the cases usually receiving high visibility, and on an electoral process, which presented characteristics differentiating it from the previous Romanian elections. These characteristics can be summed up as follows: the breakdown of county-based constituencies into smaller territories, according to geographical and demographical criteria, uninominal vote, instead of party lists and possibilities to communicate with the

public through mediated channels self-regulated (restricted only by *lex informatica*), rather than through traditional media (regulated by electoral laws). Apart from being an acknowledgement of the new trend in communication, political online electoral campaigns are part of the new trend in global politics, European Union policies, for instance, setting the context for debates regarding digital rights, e-democracy and e-government. It only naturally follows that electoral processes include an online presence of candidates, besides the extensive coverage of the elections in the virtual world.

Our study looked into the repertoire of new media tools “edition 2012” employed by Timis County candidates, only for identifying the intensity of online communication, without analyzing the content of messages or the reactions of the public. Therefore, qualitative analyses are open for investigation and a close monitoring of the recurrent candidates can show whether the communication patterns established in 2012 bear their signature or are merely the result of clever political advisory work. Nevertheless, online political communication is, undoubtedly, a strong pillar in electoral campaigns, and further studies should focus on exploring the evolution of this important component for the symbolic construction of the electoral field.

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