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USING SOCIAL MEDIA IN POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS. EVIDENCE FROM ROMANIA

empirical
study

Keywords

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Abstract

In this paper, we aim at gaining insight into the Romanian president's online campaign during the 2014 elections. Although there is a growing body of literature on online political campaigns in Western democracies, little research exists on using Social Media in an emergent economy like Romania. In order to take a closer look at the president's online communication strategy, we conducted a content analysis on the posts published on the president's official Facebook page over the two weeks leading up to Election Day. This study is the first of this kind and it indicates that president Iohannis used close-ended messages to control the speech, while reaching out to emotion to gain users' support.

INTRODUCTION

The year 2008 represents a milestone for the use of Social Media in political communication, triggered by the 2008 presidential elections in United States of America (Nesbitt-Larking, 2010; Mattoni, 2013; Hoffman, 2012). The transformation of social networks into one of the most relevant means of mass communication has not gone unnoticed by the specialists in the field of politics, who took advantage of the opportunity to reach out to voters (John, 2013; Kaid, 2009; Chadwick, 2010; Cogburn, 2011). Authors worldwide agree that, in the digital era, using Social Media has become essential in political campaigns: authors Schmitt-Beck and Makenrodt, as well as Nesbitt-Larking (2010) or Mascheroni and Mattoni (2013) argue that Social Media help targeting the electorate who is less responsive to traditional channels of communication.

In Romania, the social networks appeared in 2008, with the rise of Facebook and Twitter. The most popular online platforms among Romanian users are Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, Google, Flickr, and LinkedIn. Facebook has experienced impressive growth in the recent years, 8 300 0000 users being registered on the Romanian territory in 2016 (facebrands.ro).

If in the United States of America the presidential campaign of Obama has become a milestone, in Romania, a similar case can be found in the presidential elections from November 2014. The liberal candidate Klaus Iohannis conducted a massive online campaign on Facebook that, in some authors' opinion (Tasențe, 2015), led to his election.

The electoral communication through social networking sites has experienced an increasing professionalization from the Romanian's parliamentary elections in 2008 – when it was introduced for the first time the electoral communication strategies, in Romania – until the Presidential elections in 2014 (Tasențe, 2014). If at 2008 and 2012 parliamentary elections Social Media were used only as unidirectional media, the 2014 presidential campaign seemed to have enabled dialogue and online mobilisation.

The paper aims at gaining insight into the 2014 presidential campaign, with the purpose of taking a closer look at the online communication strategy. To that purpose, we conducted a content analysis on the posts published on the president's official Facebook page over the two weeks leading up to Election Day. Using both a priori and emergent coding, we studied the 77 posts published in the second round of the electoral campaign and we identified the patterns used in Iohannis' online speech.

Our objectives are:

01. Identifying and describing the main patterns and central topics in Iohannis' online speech.
02. Identifying and describing the elements of rhetoric in Iohannis' online speech.
03. Identifying and describing the key objectives of Iohannis' online speech.
04. Identifying and describing the online participation in Iohannis' digital speech.

The paper is structured as follows: the next section provides a literature review on Social Media and political communication; section 2 presents the methodology; in the third section we discuss the findings; section 4 concludes, outlines the limitations and gives an outlook for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the past few decades, the influence of technology on everyday life has grown in significance. It has affected nearly every fact of life, including how we interact with the political process. Candidates, interest groups, political parties, and civic organizations have begun to increasingly rely on the Internet, and especially on Social Media, to reach out to citizens (Howard 2005; Negrine & Lilliker, 2012; Trammell, William, & Postelnicu, 2006).

Taking the example of American president's digital campaign, more and more politicians start to integrate the social networks into their communication strategy. Recently, a growing body of literature has focused on Social Media's ability to empower the citizens and to reduce the democratic deficit (Vaccari, 2013; Chadwick, 2010; Hong & Nadler, 2010; Hoffman, 2012). Despite the extensive claims about a shift of paradigm in political communication, the findings indicate that politicians' options go towards a rather conservative use of Social Media, with only a few interactivity features (Larson, 2013; Gerodimos & Justinussen, 2015; Larsson, 2013; Tolbert & McNeal, 2012).

Even though recent search has yet to confirm the shift towards a new paradigm, it cannot be denied that political communication has indeed changed over the last decade (Vaccari, 2013; Baumgartner & Morris, 2010). The gradual professionalization of the online political speech was the first step towards a new type of campaign (Negrine & Lilleker, 2002; Brader, 2005; Pasek & Romer, 2009), a much more intense, personalised and organised campaign.

Web 2.0. has changed the way online information flows and, as a result, it helped shape the political campaigns (Compton, 2008; Baldin-Philipi, 2012; Qualman, 2010). Originally, web platforms were used to share information and mobilise citizens (Larsson, 2013; Woolley, 2010). Because now the politicians can control the information flow, something that journalists and media organizations

have traditionally managed during an election campaign, it is natural to understand why online political communication has significantly increased over the last years (Baumgartner & Morris, 2010; Gulati & Williams, 2007; Lawrence, Sides, & Farrell, 2010).

A massive amount of research has been dedicated to the unprecedented use of Social Media in 2008 American presidential campaign (Cogburn & Espinoza-Vasquez, 2011; Sweetser & Lariscy, 2008; Vaccari 2010; Woolley, Limperos, & Oliver, 2010; Hoffman, 2012). In his work, Martin (2013) applies the Aristotelian rhetoric to Obama's 2012 online speech, in an attempt to find out if the candidate encourages online participation and empowers citizens. Martin's results indicate that president Obama used mostly emotion in his online speech in order to build his image, defend his platform, attack the opponents or mobilise his supporters. Martin's findings are corroborated by Brader (2005), Sweetser & Lariscy (2008), Trammell, Williams, & Postelnicu (2006) who argue that it is natural to make extensive use of emotion in a political speech, as it has greater impact on the implication of supporters.

In 2015, Gerodimos and Justinussen conducted a content analysis to describe Barack Obama's 2012 presidential campaign and identified the main objectives of his speech: call to action, attacking the opponent, collective appeal, and endorsing political platform.

Social Media means dialogue, interactivity, feedback (Xenos & Moy, 2007; Sweetser & Lariscy, 2008). Certainly, one of the key elements of Social Media is participation (Zuniga, Veenstra, & Vraga, 2010; Pasek & Romer, 2010; Baumgartner & Morris, 2010). In 2006, Macintosh developed a participation ladder comprising three stages of online participation: e-Enabling, e-Engagement, and e-Empowering. Applied to the political field, the first stage enables the interactions between the politician and his followers, the politician having the ability to share information among his fans. In the second stage, the candidate asks for followers' feedback, while in the third stage he collaborates with them and gives them responsibilities to fulfil (for example, to share messages, to find new supporters or to vote).

METHODOLOGY

In our research we focus on Iohannis' online communication strategy in order to find out if the candidate's speech encourages online participation, dialogue and debate or, on the contrary, if Iohannis uses one way communication, with only a few interactivity features.

In the study, we describe the digital campaign by using the categories identified in the literature review: the objective of the online communication (Gerodimos & Justinussen, 2015), the rhetoric of

the speech (Martin, 2013), and the online participation of the users (Macintosh, 2006). Moreover, we also use emergent coding to analyse the main topic, the key concepts and the affective state of the posts.

We conducted a content analysis on Iohannis' posts published on Facebook during the second round of presidential elections. The analysis led to a sample of 84 posts, but we only took into consideration 77 of them; seven posts did not contain information related to the purpose of the paper. For the analysis, we used only the text of the posts, without considering the video or the graphic content.

In the coding process, the categories were divided into 10 different codes (one for each subcategory), which were interpreted in dichotomous categories, sorted by present (1) or absent (0) for each post. Because the same post can contain two or more codes, the 77 posts generated 82 mentions of the codes.

FINDINGS

The main topic of the speech is "change": "vote for change", "chance of changing the future", "choose change" are some of the most frequently used incentives. The online presidential campaign focuses on the antithesis between Romania now (current state of the country) and Romania tomorrow (how Romania should be), in an attempt to highlight the transformation preached by the candidate. Iohannis made more than 40 mentions about Romania tomorrow in his posts, arguing that Romania tomorrow means "prosperity", "normality", "hope", "total reformation", to name but a few.

Overall, the tone of communication is positive, only 22 of the posts comprising negative elements. As expected, the negative posts target Iohannis' opponent, Victor Ponta. The language is simple, clear and direct, with a tendency for first and second person pronouns (I, you, we).

During the two weeks of campaign, Klaus Iohannis published 84 posts. The average number of posts is 6 per day, with a slight increase in the last days of the campaign. The day of elections reached the upper limit, 22 posts being published.

The average length of one post is 4 lines, 44 words. The shortest message represents an incentive to vote: "We vote with hope for change!", whereas the longest post contains 17 lines and 147 words, being a critique against his opponent, Victor Ponta.

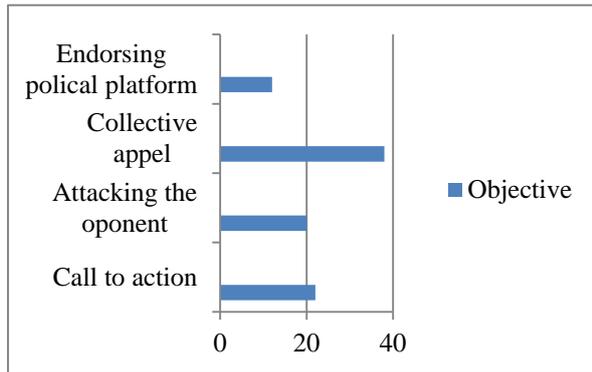


Figure 1. The objective of communication

We see that the objective that lies with the greatest frequency in political discourse is the collective appeal, the candidate placing at the centre of his communication the online community. On the other side, endorsing political platform receives only 12 appearances in 77 posts. A similar number of occurrences have the objectives aimed at attacking the opponent and mobilising the users (call to action). Therefore, Iohannis uses Facebook especially to gain audience's sympathy and support, trying to get close to it; endorsing his political programme is not a priority.

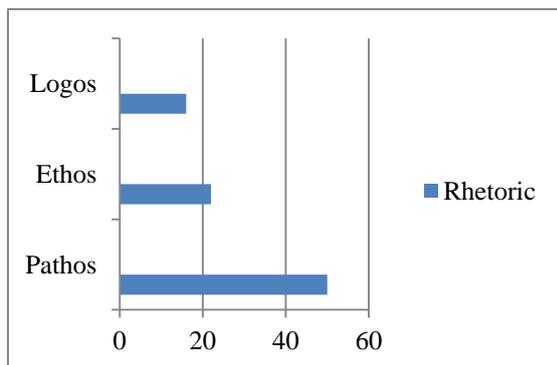


Figure 2. Use of rhetoric

Iohannis appeals to emotion (Pathos) more frequently than to the other dimensions of rhetoric. In his speech, he tries to influence the users by triggering their emotion, rather than presenting rational arguments (Logos) or focusing on his credibility (Ethos). As more and more studies argue that voting is rather irrational than rational (Hoffman, 2012; Kuhn, 2013), it may seem logical for the candidate to extensively use the emotional dimension of rhetoric.

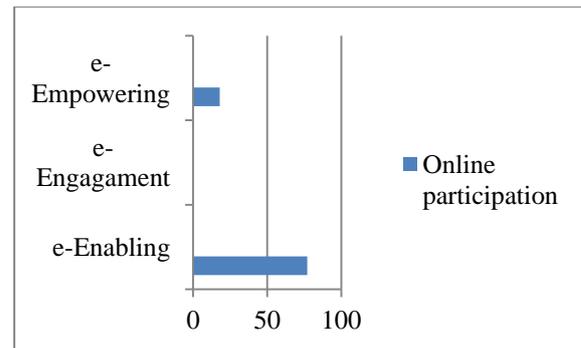


Figure 3. Online participation in Iohannis' posts

Although it is logical that all posts fit into the first stage of participation (e-Enabling), as Facebook provides the proper framework for the interaction between political candidates and their supporters, one might ask why none of the posts published is to be found in the second stage of participation (e-Engagement), although some of the posts are included in the last stage. The answer lies within Klaus Iohannis' communication strategy; first impression on Iohannis' speech is that he encourages interaction between him and his fans, when actually the speech is extremely well controlled. The posts are close ended and there is no request for feedback. The illusion of interactions comes from the rhetoric, which gives the aspect of a two-way communication. Therefore, the empowering of the users is only partial; the (virtual) cooperation between the candidate and the audience is not truly authentic.

As seen in Table 1, when it comes to call to action posts, the candidate uses mostly emotion (Pathos) to trigger action among users, whereas for rational argumentation (Logos) he finds very little use. Although not surprising, emotion (Pathos) is also in the centre of posts attacking the opponent, but it is hardly used to endorse the political platform.

Interestingly, in order to gain users' support (collective appeal), the candidate reaches out to emotion (Pathos) and credibility, but he makes little use of logical arguments (Logos). On the other hand, when endorsing his political platform, Iohannis focuses on his credibility (Ethos) rather than on emotion (Pathos).

CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Social Media has met an amazing development over the last decade, more and more people including Social Media in their daily routines. As a result, social networks have become one of the main channels of mass communication, which led to their natural integration in the political campaigns.

The content analysis indicated that during the 2014 presidential elections, Iohannis focused on getting closer to the users in order to gain their support. His attention was also directed towards his

opponent, more than 20 posts being critiques of Victor Ponta. Moreover, the predominant use of emotion as an element of rhetoric suggests that his rational arguments are not as powerful as his ability to reach out to users' sensitive side.

At a closer look at 2014 Iohannis' online campaign, we discover a pattern of communication used in both Obama's presidential campaigns. Baldwin-Philipi (2012) and Vaccari (2010) argue that Obama's speech was very well managed, in order to restrict the negative online interactions. His posts did not encourage feedback, but only aimed at directing users to spread the campaign's message. In addition, his speech also focused on emotion (Pathos), 28 of the 78 of his posts' pictures displaying Obama together with his wife, Michelle (Hoffman, 2012; Bronstein, 2013). Despite the personalisation of the speech in an effort to close the gap between the candidate and his supporters, Iohannis' discourse on Facebook was controlled and close-ended. Therefore, even though the campaign successfully extended the number of supporters, it did not generate truly authentic feedback. Similar to Obama's digital campaign, the speech of Romanian president was discretely managed by setting the public agenda, meaning that the users were guided towards the topics of discussion.

As for our limitations, even though it is the first time a study was conducted on president Iohannis' use of rhetoric and online participation during 2014 presidential campaign, this sample is still a partial snapshot in the context of a massive campaign that started months before Election Day. Therefore, future research could take into consideration extending the content analysis to all the posts published on Facebook during 2014 presidential campaign. Furthermore, in order to complete the analysis, future research should include the pictures and videos in the posts, for a better understanding of the communication strategy.

Despite our limitations, the study generates valuable insight into president Iohannis' 2014 online campaign, that can be used in future research. Moreover, the 2016 elections will provide more information to determine whether the 2014 Iohannis' campaign was strictly a Iohannis case or a new set of techniques that can be used by any campaign.

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Appendix A
Iohannis' 2012 Facebook campaign

Tables

Table 1.
Cross-references between the objective of communication and the used rhetoric

Objective	Rhetoric			Total
	Pathos	Ethos	Logos	
Call to action	16	4	2	22
Endorsing political platform	2	7	3	10
Attacking the opponent	10	3	7	20
Collective appeal	18	17	3	38
Total	46	21	15	82

