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ONLINE CAMPAIGNING IN THE 2016 USA ELECTIONS - A COMPARATIVE APPROACH

Case
Study

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Abstract

Nowadays, we are witnessing an unprecedented large number of voters who take their daily information from social media. As a result, having a strong online campaign has become a requirement. The United States of America provide a valuable example of how social media have become increasingly more involved in the communication between politicians and voters. That is why this paper aims at bringing evidence from 2016 presidential race, by analyzing the online communication campaigns of finalists Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. Our findings show that even if both candidates' campaigns successfully engage with the voters, Donald Trump is taking better advantage of social media's features: embracing immediacy (right now), transparency (unvarnished expression) and risk (rather than caution).

INTRODUCTION

Throughout much of the last decade, we have seen how progressive social movements received the power of the internet all over the world. There was a Green Revolution in Iran, followed by the Arab Spring in the Middle East and North Africa. In the United States, we saw the Occupy Wall Street movement and the demonstrations of #BlackLivesMatter. In the United Kingdom, Facebook played an essential role in the once unthinkable initiative to get the country out of the European Union ("Brexit" – 2016). In the Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte, a mayor who had far less budget than his opponents, managed to lead a huge army of online supporters to help him win the presidency. The 2008 USA presidential elections revolutionized online communication, leading to the so called "Obama phenomenon", while the 2016 USA elections emphasized even more Social Media's contribution.

Recent years have placed Social Media among the most important means of communication during a political campaign (Utz, 2009; Ward & Janelle, 2010; Schmitt-Beck & Mackenrodt, 2010; Pedersen, 2012; Mascheroni & Mattoni, 2013). Due to the high penetration rate, the information shared via social networking can get to the otherwise unreachable audiences (Sweetser & Lariscy, 2008; Fooley, 2013; Carlisle & Patton, 2013). A study by Wattal, Schuff, Mandviwalla (2010) showed that using Social Media in political campaigns leads to better results in the polls, especially if used in an interactive manner.

Studies on the subject revealed the contribution of the Internet to better inform citizens and generate transparency in public action, as well as to extend the role of the nontraditional means of communication (Cohen & Tsfati, 2009; Aarts & Thomassen, 2008; Towner, 2012; Chadwick, 2010). In 2013, Bronstein showed that, compared to the existing media, the Internet offers four main advantages: reducing the cost of stocking the information; no intermediates between politicians and voters; custom research in order to build a database of their own, based on personal perceptions and classifications; extending the sources of information, due to the easy access to the Internet (Bronstein, 2013).

When it comes to initiating or strengthening communication with voters, the Internet provides the most innovative and interesting possibilities: e-mail, blogging, podcasting, social networking and video sharing, to name but a few (Panagopoulos, 2010; Harris & Harrigan, 2015; Johnson & Perlmutter, 2010; Qualman, 2010). Its inherent interactivity, which allows information to move between politicians, parties, institutions and citizens, overcoming national borders, its users'

freedom of movement in cyberspace, the lack of intermediates of the editorial and the possibility of communication vertical and horizontal helped the Internet became a valuable tool in strengthening democracy (Wattal, Schuff, Mandviwalla & Williams, 2010; Towner & Dulio, 2012). What is more, the Internet gave smaller parties a real chance to keep up with influential parties which can invest massive amounts of money in advertising.

Online communication cannot win the election on behalf of an unsuccessful candidate, but it can help a campaign to effectively develop actions such as fundraising, persuading, organizing and mobilizing the electorate (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2012; Anstead & Chadwick, 2009). An advantage for politicians is that electoral messages on the Internet can be easily and rapidly shared, enabling real-time reactions during campaigns. Nowadays, it is much easier for a politician to communicate with his electors, with no need for the approval of an intermediate. On the other hand, specialists raise the issue of risk when it comes to online communication, as it is very easy for spontaneous situations to get out of control (LaMarre & Suzuki-Lambrech, 2013; Carlisle & Patton, 2013; Towner & Dulio, 2012; Metzgar & Maruggi, 2009; Bode, 2012).

POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

It is estimated that the emergence of political marketing in the United States of America took place around 1952, when President Franklin D. Roosevelt contracted an advertising agency to create a television advertising campaign. The first advertising agency specializing in political campaigns, "Campaign Inc.", was founded by Clem Whitaker and Leone Baxter in California.

The importance of using political marketing in the United States was acknowledged during the presidential elections of 1952 and 1960, as a result of the rapidly changing electoral environment. The 1956 presidential campaign was the first one that used short advertising spots, strategically placed during popular television shows. In 1960, Kennedy's TV debates became legendary as they lead to him winning the presidency.

2008 represents the year of Facebook revolution, with the election of first African-American president. The Obama recipe was simple: with millions of email addresses obtained voluntarily from the electorate, Obama's team was able to easily inform the electorate about all aspects of the campaign (Towner & Dulio, 2012; Wattal, Schuff, Mandviwalla & Williams, 2010). Political analysts argue that the reason the Democratic candidate's

campaign was truly revolutionary was the perfect coordination between message (change) and means of communication (Jackson & Lilleker, 2009; Conway, Kenski & Wang, 2013; Gerodimos & Justinussen, 2015). Vicktor Szigetvári, the Hungarian consultant responsible for the campaign of the Socialist Party and current and former Prime Minister of Hungary; Ralf Guldenzope, consultant for political communication in Germany, responsible for the campaign Angela Merkel's campaign; Christian Passin, in charge of the campaign for People's Party in Austria; Martin Tod, expert in online campaigning and member of the Liberal Democratic Party in the UK; all have copied the American recipe for campaigning. In all these cases, the American model, very expensive, was adapted to the national realities and to the much smaller budgets.

Phil Noble, specialist adviser for Obama's online campaign, the man who started as a volunteer in 1960 in the campaign of John F. Kennedy, argues that socializing with the electorate is essential in politics, as it brings campaign funds and it creates a new species: voter generated content. Obama has not missed anything in his online campaign, and his presence on Twitter and Facebook decisively influenced both his public image and the relationship with American voters (Sweetser & Lariscy, 2008; Vaccari 2013; Woolley, Limperos & Oliver, 2010). Specialists worldwide argue that the success of an online campaign stands not only in its interactivity across all channels: Facebook, My Space, YouTube etc., but also in the shift of paradigm, moving the focus on the voters, and not the candidate (Smith, 2009; Hoffman, 2012). As a result, voters become active participants in the campaign.

According to Smith and Hoffman (Smith, 2009; Hoffman, 2012), the politicians in the United States of America aim at voter interaction and mobilization through social networking. In the 2016 American presidential campaign, Social Media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram are called key battlegrounds. Generally speaking, during presidential races, Democrats have been considered to take better advantage of Social Media in comparison to Republicans (Pew Research Center, 2012), but the party gaps seem to be disappearing when it comes to the Congress.

A national survey of 1,520 adults conducted between March 7 and April 4, 2016, in the USA, reveals that 80% of Americans use Social Media. The most popular Social Media platform is Facebook: 79% of Americans use Facebook; 24% use Twitter, 31% - Pinterest, Instagram (32%) or LinkedIn (29%) (Pew Research Center, 2016) (Social Media Update 2016, 2016). What is more, 44% of U.S. adults have found about the 2016

presidential campaign from Social Media platforms.

2016 USA PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS ONLINE INTERACTION

The last three elections in the United States of America have proven the importance of Social Media during elections. As a result, politicians have made Social Media one of their most important tools in communication campaigns. The 2016 finalists for the White House, Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, made no exception and made intensive use of Social Media tools.

When it comes to their online presence, it appears that Donald Trump is significantly more popular than his opponent, Hillary Clinton. He admits that his investment in Social has helped him much more than the investments his rivals made in traditional media campaigns (\$238.9 million compared with \$450.6 million by Clinton) (Jacob Pramuk, 2016). Trump has invested less money, its impact has been much greater, and has also used social networks as an effective tool to disassemble the plot line of its rivals in the traditional media.

For example, a search on Google leads to 420 000 000 results for Trump and 120 000 000 for Clinton (Google search Hillary Clinton, 2016). For the republican candidate, top three entries include his website (trump.com), his Twitter account (@realDonaldTrump) and the Wikipedia entry. Hillary Clinton has the same top three entries, but in different hierarchy: her Wikipedia entry, her website (hillaryclinton.com) and her Twitter account (@HillaryClinton) (Google Search Donald Trump, 2016).

During 2016 presidential elections the most popular social networks have been Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. A report from 2016 reveals that during the campaign (January to November 6th, 2016), Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton gathered a fan base of almost 49 000 000 people across Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram (Katie Meyer, 2016). On those three networks, Trump and Clinton's posts attracted almost 500 000 engagements (the engagement represents the number of actions fans have taken as a result of seeing a post. This includes likes, comments, shares, retweets, video views, and link clicks).

On Facebook, Donald Trump collected over 200 million engagements and 12 million Facebook fans (Donald Trump's official Facebook page, 2016). Hillary Clinton received 72 million engagements and 7.9 million Facebook fans (Hillary Clinton's official Facebook page, 2016). Trump's most popular posts make reference to Hillary Clinton, immigrants and his tagline "Make America Great Again".

When it comes to Twitter, Trump receives far more retweets – sometimes over ten times more – compared to his opponent, Hillary Clinton (Donald Trump's official Twitter page, 2016). His tweets have an average of 200 000 likes/tweet and 50 000 retweets, which is triple in comparison to Clinton's. Trump published over 3 000 tweets, with an average of 10 tweets per day, whereas Hillary Clinton posted around 1 000 tweets (Hillary Clinton's official Twitter page, 2016).

However, the most retweeted tweet belongs to Hillary Clinton, but it comes one day after her defeat. The tweet has registered over 600 000 retweets and encouraged young girls not to lose hope: "To all the little girls watching...never doubt that you are valuable and powerful & deserving of every chance & opportunity in the world." Donald Trump's most retweeted tweet is a reinforcement of his tagline "Make America Great Again" and received over 350 000 retweets.

On Instagram, Trump gathered 53 million likes and comments (Donald Trump's official Instagram page, 2016) while Hillary Clinton obtained 31 million reactions (likes and comments) (Hillary Clinton's official Instagram page, 2016).

YouTube started to be used by both candidates with six months ago before the elections in November. They have a similar number of followers, around 100 000. Interestingly, Hillary Clinton disabled the comments for all the videos published (Hillary Clinton's official YouTube channel, 2016), whereas Donald Trump's page channel allows users to comment on the videos (Donald Trump's official YouTube channel, 2016).

All in all, the report shows that during the presidential campaign, Donald Trump was clearly the most popular candidate. Trump's fan base led to 351 million engagements on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, while Hillary Clinton managed to receive only 145 million engagements. What is more, Trump's campaign reveals his better use of Social Media tools, by embracing immediacy (right now), transparency (unvarnished expression) and risk (rather than caution).

Online key messages

Hillary Clinton's online speech covers the following themes:

- Together we are strong, divided we lose;
- America needs reliable, experienced leaders, who are able to manage crises without losing their temper;
- We are on the right path, but we still need serious improvement;
- Americans need social and financial equity.

Donald Trump's speech focuses on these messages:

- The system is built against regular citizens;

- We cannot afford to be politically correct when America is confronting serious dangers (poverty, immigration, terrorism);

- All politicians are corrupted; only someone outside the system can save America;

- We need to put America first.

Clinton focuses its message on the importance of America being united: "Together we are stronger". This message is opposed to the exclusive formula of Trump, presented as one that divides and weakens the unity of American. Also, a very important secondary message in Clinton's speech is the reference to the historical moment of a woman's first nomination in the race for the White House. Moreover, there are several messages referring to gender equality and respecting women's rights. However, the number of attacks coming from Clinton against Trump is lower than the number of her opponent's attacks. The candidate Clinton draws a positive picture of the US, where problems can be resolved through a joint effort where the development direction and leadership must be preserved.

Clinton focuses her speech on mainly positive elements, as the need for unity and continuity in the US. To these she adds positive elements of her biography, especially related to family strength. Also, Clinton speaks about economy, immigration and foreign policy, education and health, equal rights and combating climate change.

Trump's speech is critic and negative, with many statistics and references to violence and crime. He puts great emphasis on the need for security and claims America is not safe anymore, for which he holds accountable Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton. As a candidate of opposition, his approach is not surprising, taking into consideration he needs to emphasize the mistakes of current administration.

One of his main concerns is portraying Hillary Clinton as a corrupted politician, a representative of "the establishment". In contrast, Trump stands for a fresh, revolutionary, outside the system ambassador who fights against the establishment.

Trump's most commonly used word is "I", while Clinton's is "we". It does not come as a surprise that Donald Trump uses negative words or phrases when speaking about the current government, president or his opponents. Words as "bad, nasty, horrible" have a high frequency in his speech. On the other hand, Trump uses positive language most often when reinforcing his campaign: "great", "amazing", "wonderful".

CONCLUSION

With billions of people connected to Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Twitter, Instagram and other popular services, social networks have become an

increasingly powerful political and cultural force, to such an extent that its effects are now beginning to alter the development of worldwide events. Donald Trump's choice may be the most compelling illustration yet of social networking across the globe helping to fundamentally reconfigure human society.

Social networks have revolutionized communication. They are destabilizing and replacing old school institutions, as well as established ways of doing things, including political parties, transnational organizations and implicit social bans against flagrant expressions of racism and xenophobia. What is more, because these services allow people to communicate with each other more freely, they are helping create surprisingly influential social organizations among groups that were once marginalized. Everyone, in his own way, is now exerting a power previously thought unthinkable, resulting in unpredictable and sometimes destabilizing geopolitical events.

Online communication cannot win elections on behalf of an unsuccessful candidate, but it can help candidates to effectively develop actions such as fundraising, persuading, organizing and mobilizing the electorate. In the case of 2016 presidential elections, many factors explain Trump's victory, but Social Media are certainly essential in assessing the result. Even though Social Media skills alone do not determine political outcomes,

Trump's online popularity and savvy use of Social Media had a major contribution to his victory, as himself acknowledged in an interview 60 minutes after his victory.

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