Abstract

While the social media optimists believe online political communication implies a bigger participation of the audience, this study shows that politicians are preoccupied with their political image and less concerned of building a dialogue with their voters. Our hypothesis is that politicians use online communication to build a certain image and they use social media less for developing a relationship with their target audience. The content analysis method was applied on the Facebook accounts and on blogs belonging to the leaders of the Romanian parliamentary parties at two different moments: January-February 2012 riots and July-August 2012 Referendum campaign.

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1. Introduction

From the street movements initiated on Facebook and developed in the large cities of Romania in January 2012, to personal attacks made by politicians on blogs, social media are being used by the Romanian politicians to continuously communicate with the target-audience or to attack the competition. The optimist ideology of social media participation claims that internet grants the possibility to contest power (Ulmanu, 2011, p.141). The pessimist ideology blames social media for promoting a fake participation, a pseudo-democratization of the modern societies (Sorice, 2011, p.101). While the optimists of social media participation believe online political communication implies a bigger political participation of the audience and a democratization of the political competition, this study will show if Romanian political candidates are exclusively preoccupied with their political image or if they are concerned of building an online dialogue with their voters or their competitors. The main objective of this article is to investigate the posts made on the Facebook accounts and on blogs by the parliamentary parties’ leaders, in order to measure how many of the messages they have sent online were about political, personal or professional themes. What type of image did they try to convey and how did they react to what happened on the social and political scene?

2. Theoretic frame

The optimist theoreticians of social media participation (Levinson, 2009, pp. 139-141) believe that, in the web 2.0 age, we are witnessing the transformation of the audience from information consumers into information
producers. In the digital era, the trend is for the number of information producers to become as big as the number of information consumers. Looking from this theoretical perspective, in the times of the printing machine and of the written information production, information consumers were more than the information consumers, but today the number of those who generate news/events and disseminates them online for the large masses tends to become equal to the number of those who consume news/events. In the social media age, each citizen having access to an online communication platform turns into an information producer.

2.1. The analysis of the Romanian online market. Characteristics and consumption trends

The FreeEx Report, Freedom of the press in Romania (Chapter 1) shows that in 2011 the print market collapsed in terms of circulation and advertising incomes. According to an IRES (The Romanian Institute for Media Assessment and Strategy) study published by the Mediafax Press Agency and entitled “Romanians believe that televisions manipulate and broadcast anything for the rating’s sake” (November 10th 2011), Romanians had lost their confidence in mass-media, especially in the TV stations. 75% of the Romanians think that televisions are willing to broadcast anything for the rating’s sake and 65% of the TV viewers consider television to be manipulating.

The IRES study from December 2011 published on DailyBusiness.ro, quoted in the FreeEx Report and entitled “Who presents us the political life: see the most accessed information media” (January 4th 2012) showed that 81.8% of the Romanians get informed about politics by watching TV and 7% of them extract their political information online. Internet has become more relevant than printed newspapers, that remain the preferred source of political information for 6.2% of the Romanians. Radio is the main source of political information for 2.1% of the population, while 1% extract political information from their family, friends, work place or from other sources.

As the consumption of online political information has increased, the number of internet users has grown. As shown on http://www.internetworldstats.com, the number of Romanian internet users grew from 7.430.000 in 2009 to 7,58 million users in 2010, and to 8.578.484 users in 2011. This means an increase of over 1 million users in only two years.

During the months of the 2009 presidential elections, there were 270.540 Facebook accounts originating from Romania in September and 414.000 users in November 2009. According to Facebrands.ro, in January 2010 there were 518.140 Romanian Facebook users and in January 2011 there were already 2.405.920 accounts. Getting back to the present, in September 2012 there were 5 million Facebook users in Romania.

2.2 Street protests – voice and carnival

The street protests that were generated on the internet, the demonstrations that were initiated on social networks like Facebook in the Arab countries (Arab Spring), or in the European countries struggling with the economic crisis like Spain, Italy, Russian, Romania (in January 2012), are described by some of the social media theoreticians as forms of democratic participation in the public space. My hypothesis is that these social movements can be treated both as outlets, as well as revolt manifestations allowed and even encouraged by the political regime as forms of expressing controlled frustration. In the terms of Albert Hirschman (1999), protests are voice forms meant to release the tension of those who are most frustrated, and to postpone or annihilate the exit of the most discontent individuals in the society.

According to Mikhail Bakhtin’s terminology (1998), street protests are carnival-like expression forms, through which the establishment ensures its survival in power, and that the political and media elite in fact encourage, in order to protect the authoritarian system or the populist regime. Bakhtin’s carnival theory explains that the folk celebrations that allowed treating the authority in terms of humor and parody have offered the oppressed lower classes a relief from the rigidity of the feudal system.

During the protests that were initiated on Facebook in January-February 2012 and took place in the big cities of Romania, the journalists were delighted and amused by the creative placards and banners carried by the people on the streets, which displayed witty and humorous slogans regarding the government, the president and the political
power. Similar protest forms that were transmitted as jokes, anecdotes or ironies in the TV sketches or in movies were also allowed during the communist regime in Romania. Back then, the underground jokes about the dictatorial Ceausescu couple were a mechanism cultivated by the Communist Party members and ideologists to defuse the tensions in the society (Rostás & Momoc, 2007, pp. 353-361).

2.3 Social media as political PR tool

Undoubtedly, social media (blogs or the social networks like Facebook, Twitter, as well as the content-oriented platforms, such as YouTube or Flickr) constitute the communication channels that common citizens are using in the web 2.0 age to assemble discussion groups, to endorse social or human causes, and to mobilize in the offline environment, in order to protect the causes that they support online. Once they have reached the street, the internet users interact with other citizens attending the protest for the same causes. The latter often turn out to have found out about the event via other communication media and sometimes they even associate for defending different causes than the ones that internet users came out on the street to support. The protesting mob is heterogeneous, they use humor as a buffer on their placards and banners with slogans, and so this is why the entire manifestation looks and feels like a carnival.

Politicians use social media to communicate with their audience and to call them either to protest, or to vote. Between the electoral campaigns, the social networks and blogs are platforms on which politicians promote the dialogue with the community that they represent or convey a certain image about themselves. The specialists in PR and in reputation management are in charge with transmitting a very specific profile of their candidate and use the online environment for this purpose (Rus, 2006, pp. 14-24).

In a (semi-)presidential regime in which the potential candidates for presidency are in a permanent competition, the distance between the electoral campaign periods and the political cycle (the period of the term of office per se) tends to disappear. Theoreticians (Sorice, 2011, p. 39) make a distinction between political and electoral communication, pointing out that political communication implies building a relationship between politicians and citizens when discussing different public themes, based on the “logic of developing inter-relationships”. Electoral communication has the objective to obtain the voting agreement and is based on the “logic of persuasion”.

3. The hypothesis

The hypothesis is that the Romanian politicians used social media (Facebook accounts and blogs) not for encouraging rational dialogue and the debate of projects in the society, but to mock the competitors, to treat them with irony, and mostly to position their political profile in the voters’ minds. To check this hypothesis, the social media communication of Romanian parliamentary parties’ leaders has been monitored during the following months in 2012: January-February (the period of the revolts against the right-wing Government that was led by Emil Boc), July-August (the Referendum campaign for suspending the President of Romania, Traian Basescu, on July 29th).

4. Method

The content analysis method was used for answering the question on whether the blog or the Facebook accounts were used to promote campaign themes or to denigrate the counter-candidates. The content analysis method was applied to establish what sort of image the candidates displayed in the online environment. Whenever the post was about the candidate himself, his personal life the post has been classified as promoting human dimension of the candidate. Whenever the post has been about his campaign or his political party the post has been classified as promoting the political dimension. When the theme post was about his profession and work the candidate tried to emphasize the professional dimension of his profile.

The qualitative method of content analysis as explained by Alex Mucchielli (2002, pp. 38-48) implies the following steps: Encoding, Categorization and Establishing the relationships (or Data interpretation). Encoding aims to extract the essential of the testimony posted on the blog by using the blog post key-words. Any qualitative
analysis condenses continuous and abundant data. This means that the key-words or expressions that summarize the phrases of interest must be very accurate and true to the blog testimony. By simply reading the key-words, an uninformed reader should be able to reconstitute the blog testimony without having to read it. For Encoding, the questions we use are “What subject do we have here? What is this about?” The answers to these questions become key-words or summarizing expressions.

The Categorization is illustrated by transposing the key-words into concepts. A category is a word that abstractly defines a cultural, social or psychological phenomenon as it is perceived in a data corpus. The category leads to theoretic concepts, which establish the relationships between the categories. Through categorization, the key-words were integrated into certain speech topics. The subject of each post was rated as belonging to the political, professional or personal domain.

5. Findings and Results

In the context of the street movements (January-February 2012) triggered by the dismissal of Raed Arafat, Secretary of State in the Ministry of Health, I have analyzed the Facebook accounts and blogs belonging to the leader of the parliamentary Opposition and president of the National Liberal Party (NLP), Crin Antonescu, to the independent politician who is the Mayor of Bucharest, Sorin Oprescu, and to the President of Romania, Traian Băsescu. The three politicians have competed in the 2009 presidential elections.

Their communication was comparatively monitored during July-August 2012. The President was suspended by the Parliament on July 6th and the campaign for dismissing the President ended with the July 29th Referendum. The period in which the Constitutional Court had to decide if 50% plus one of the citizens with the right to vote had showed up at the poll was also monitored. The Constitutional Court invalidated the referendum on August 21st.

President Băsescu did not have a blog during the January-February protests and he used the website of the presidential administration to communicate. During the suspension referendum campaign, Băsescu has reopened his personal Twitter account. He did not use Facebook, because this social network was populated by discussion groups and by supporters of the NLP and of the Social Democratic Party (SDP), who were demanding the dismissal of the President. On his campaign blog, basescu.ro, there were 51 posts in July-August, all concerning the political dimension. The blog topics were: 25 dismissal referendum, 5 electoral campaign, 4 suspension, 3 international relationships, 3 democracy flame, 2 Ponta Government, 2 foreign affairs, 2 state budget, 2 European Council, 1 Constitutional Court, 1 Traian Băsescu’s statement, 1 reforms. Frequent key-words: 53 Referendum, 15 democracy flame, 14 suspension, 12 Social Liberal Union (USL), 11 Traian Băsescu, 6 Crin Antonescu, 5 Victor Ponta, 5 Justice, 5 Fraud, 5 Constitution, 4 Constitutional Court, 4 validation, 3 dismissal.

During the same period, the President had 87 posts on his Twitter account, 84 in the political dimension, 2 professional, 1 human. The topics corresponding to the posts: 20 Presidents’ statement, 17 interview, 17 Referendum, 7 crisis in Romania, 5 Parliament meeting, 3 Ponta plagiarism, 3 suspension, 3 state modernization, 3 electoral manifestation, 2 text message, 2 budget, 1 democracy flame, 1 wish, 1 salary cut, 1 single chamber Parliament and reducing the number of parliamentarians, 1 international relations. Key-words: 17 interview, 15 Referendum, 10 press statement, 7 suspension, 5 crisis, 4 vote, 4 abuse, 4 Băsescu, 3 manifestation, 3 copy-paste, 3 plagiarism, 2 democracy flame, 2 budget, 1 Saint Ilie, 1 name day anniversary.

The Mayor of the capital, Sorin Oprescu, had a single (political) post on his blog, sorinoprescu.wordpress.com, during the street protests, in January-February, when we wrote about local administration issues. During the campaign for the Referendum, after winning a new term of office at the City Hall on June 10th, he did not communicate on his blog, ignoring this platform. Oprescu used Facebook to promote his political image and his local administration achievements. During the two months of protests, Oprescu almost did not mention the University Square invasion on his Facebook account. He had 153 posts, of which 143 were about politics/administration, 8 professional and 2 human. In 67 posts talked about the measures he took for removing the snow in Bucharest, 12 social assistance, 12 city development, 10 public manifestations, 7 cleaning, 7 football match, 5 traffic road, 5 cultural event, 5 TV participation, 4 meeting of the General Council of the City Hall, 3 passage inauguration,
3 technological exhibition, 2 traffic, 2 wishes, 1 protected monuments, 1 emergency call center number, 1 RADET debts, 1 electrical power, 1 water and sewage network, 1 snow caused issues, 1 sociological research, 1 daily agenda of the General Council, 1 photo album.

The leader of the Opposition and NLP President, Crin Antonescu, used his blog only three times in January-February for posts on political topics: twice about the snap elections and once about voting on lists vs. in uninominal elections. The key-words used when requesting the fall of Traian Băsescu and his Government were: 40 people, 24 democratic/democracy/to democratize, 21 snap elections, 20 government, 17 solution, 16 Băsescu, 14 NLP, 14 President, 12 power, 11 Parliament, 10 protest(s)/protesters, 10 prime-minister, 8 Raed Arafat, 8 opposition, 8 war, 8 Romansians, 7 citizens, 6 manifestations, 4 uninominal system, 3 political class, 2 voting on lists, 1 suspension. Throughout the protests period, Antonescu posted 34 times on Facebook. The topics of his speech were 33 times political and once on the human dimension: 10 TV participation, 5 snap elections, 4 Unification Day, 3 press conference, 2 NLP promo, 2 opposition, 1 public protest, 1 manifestation, 1 power, 1 parliamentary strike, 1 modern state, 1 public debate at EP, 1 Mihai Răzvan Ungureanu as prime-minister, 1 funerals of actor Emil Hossu. Key-words: 24 NLP, 15 President, 11 Antonescu, 6 protest/protesters, 7 snap elections, 3 manifestation, 2 protest, 2 political abuse, 1 revolt.

Antonescu was Romania’s interim President during Traian Băsescu’s dismissal campaign. He posted only once on his blog, in July, about the “political alternative”. Key-words: 7 state, 6 administration, 5 society, 5 alternative, 3 crisis. He had only 4 political posts on his Facebook accounts in two months. Topics: 2 TV participation, 2 Băsescu’s dismissal. Key-words: 4 President, 3 Antonescu, 3 Romansians, 1 dismissal, 1 Băsescu, 1 interim President, 1 „The Romania of common-sense”, 1 people.

6. Conclusions

Social media have been used in the electoral year 2012 as tools for mobilizing people to vote or to attend street protests, but this did not translate into a bigger degree of political dialogue or into more political power for the internet users. In context in which more and more Romansians get their political information online, the politicians who are preparing for the presidential electoral competition are using social media especially when they are not having public functions and once they get a term of office, they turn to the official communication channels.

Under the pretext that they intend to intensify the personal communication with the voters, the politicians are using their campaign blogs and Facebook accounts to call the party voters to the poll or to manifestations where they can express their support, for the retention of the sympathizers, and to position their political profile in a clearer manner. The messages posted by the politicians on Twitter are not optimized for the mobile phones, so the Twitter messages are hard to follow. Promoting their political profile online, the politicians are using social media to attack and to mock their competitors, not at all for debating their political projects. The results of the analysis have shown that social media are useful Public Relations tools for the politicians, but that rational arguments are not cultivated on these platforms.

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