

How Do Romanian Politicians Communicate Online ? An Emphasis on Facebook

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Abstract

The power of social networks and the internet as a channel of communication has established a radical change in the way people communicate. The field of politics is no exception. Over the last decade, politics has been one of the most changeable areas since the emergence of social networks, becoming the medium that most dramatically altered the meaning, scope and rhythm of media crises for political actors.

This article aims at describing the use and evolution of social networks, with a focus on the political field. In addition, this paper integrates a brief case study of the online campaigns of 2014 presidential elections and the 2016 parliamentary elections in Romania, in order to see how the political actors communicate and the online reactions generated by their messages. The results indicate that overall the 2016 online campaigns generated low interest from users, one of the reasons being that the parties used social networks as a way of disseminating information and did not truly engage with the voters.

Key words: Social networks; Romania; online communication; political campaign; Facebook

J.E.L. classification: L1

1. Introduction

Without doubt, during the recent years, the internet and social networks have been changing how people communicate. According to Wearesocial.com (Wearesocial.com, 2017), in the year of 2017, 50% world's population uses the Internet and more than 50% of the traffic comes from mobile phones (an addition of 30% compared to 2016). The internet has known a rapid evolution, from 3 billion users in 2015 to 3.8 billion users in 2017. The United Arab Emirates is leader in internet penetration, with 99%, followed by Island – 98% and Norway – 97%. In Romania, the internet penetration rate is 60% (Eurostat, 2017).

The rapid evolution is also specific to social networks, nowadays 2.8 billion users being registered on social platforms (in comparison to 2 billion users in 2015). In the top of the most popular social networks Facebook is the leader, with 1.8 billion users, followed by YouTube - 1.3 billion users, Instagram – 600 million users, LinkedIn – 470 million users, Google + and Twitter – 300 million users.

When it comes to Romania, a report by Eurostat in 2016 shows that 70% of the people aged 16-74 used the Internet and social networks (Eurostat, 2017). In addition, 88,4% of the users live in Bucharest – Ilfov, 71,8% of the users in North-West regions and centre, 58% in Muntenia and 57% in the North-East regions.

Surprisingly enough, only 10% of Romanians use internet banking, whereas in Europe the percentage is 60%, while the most frequently used features in Romania are video calling and video chatting. In Romania, the most popular online platforms are Facebook, YouTube, LinkedIn, Twitter, Instagram and Google+. Facebook is the uncontested leader, with an impressive growth in the recent years, with 9 600 000 users registered in the territory of Romania in 2017

(Facebrands, 2017). The next one is YouTube, with 7 million users, LinkedIn - 1.8 million users, Instagram - 550 000 users, Twitter - 380 000 users, but only 30 000 active.

2. Social networks and political campaigns

Social networks have become one of the most important means of communication during a political campaign, as more and more people gain access to the Internet and social networks every day. The so called web 2.0 platforms reduce the cost of stocking the information, overcome national borders and eliminate the intermediates between politicians and voters (Bakardjieva, 2009; Bode, 2012; Serazio, 2014; Dimitrova, Shehata, Strömbäck & Nord, 2014).

What is more, social networks enable users' freedom of movement and speech and horizontal communication - social networks allow politicians to listen to the voters and answer them back directly (Ellison et al., 2014; Matsa & Michell, 2014; Deters & Mehl, 2012; Burke, Kraut & Marlow, 2011).

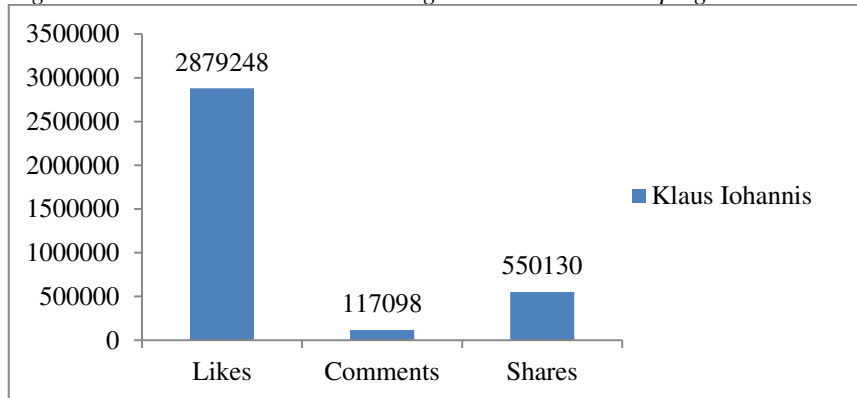
Moreover, social media allow custom treatment, as they give the chance to politicians of talking to each of the voters personally and enable the propagation of information (Klinger, 2013; Vaccari & Valeriani, 2013; Gil de Zúniga, Molyneux & Zheng, 2014). One of the characteristics of social networks is their ability to spread information and ideas. Thus, politicians make themselves known and their government plans quickly and easily. Of course, the easy dissemination is another advantage of using social networks, as they have become means of easy dissemination of information at lower costs, the attention and interest of citizens being captured with a relatively low budget (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart & Madden, 2015; Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2011; Vergeer, Hermans & Sams, 2013).

President Barack Obama has been one of the politicians who most benefited from the 2.0 policy. Several journalists and analysts concluded that his digital strategy was a key element to achieve victory (Bronstein, 2013; Foley, 2013; Kienpointner, 2013). The excellent virtual marketing and his use of social networks such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube changed the paradigm of digital campaigning (Hawthorne, Houston & McKinney, 2013; Enli & Skogerbo, 2013). Obama's campaign achieved higher income as a result of the proficient use of the Internet and raised more than 600 million dollars. Obama changed the rules of the game and focused much of his efforts on online new media. The objectives of his strategy were to carry his message to as many people as possible (especially young people), create as many direct communication channels as possible (email, online networks, text messages etc.), raise funds and provide people with tools that enabled them to spread the information (Hong & Nadler, 2012; Groshek & Al-Rawi, 2013; Jang, Lee & Park, 2014).

3. Using social networks in Romania

In 2014 the current Romanian president Klaus Iohannis became the first politician in Europe to reach one million fans on Facebook, surpassing Merkel, Sarkozy and Hollande. Taking a closer look at the president's online campaign, we discover a pattern of communication used in both Obama's presidential campaigns: he actively sought user interactions by using intensive personalisation of the speech in an attempt to close the gap between the candidate and his supporters. As a result of his strategy and use of social network tools, candidate Iohannis became rapidly very popular on Facebook, his campaign leading to millions of reactions – almost 3000 000 likes, over 500 000 shares and 100 000 comments (see Figure no.1).

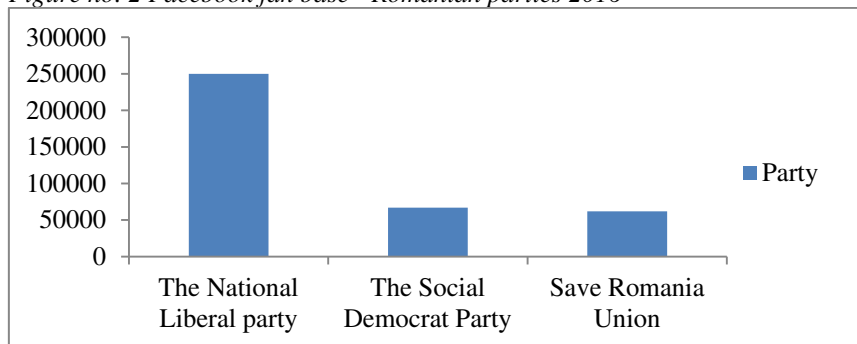
Figure no. 1 Facebook reactions during the 2014 online campaign: 17.10.2014 – 16.11. 2014



Source: Authors' construction, 2017

Currently, Klaus Iohannis continues to be the most popular Romanian politician on Facebook, with over 1 000 000 fans, followed by the former prime minister Victor Ponta (825 048 fan base), Gabriela Firea, general mayor of Bucharest, former president Traian Basescu, former Parliament member Elena Udrea and former prime minister Dacian Cioloş. As illustrated in Figure no.2, the political parties in the Romania, the most popular party on Facebook is the National Liberal Party (PNL) with approx. 250 000 fans, followed by the Social Democratic Party (PSD) - 67 000, Save Romania Union (USR) - 62 000 (Facebrands, 2017).

Figure no. 2 Facebook fan base - Romanian parties 2016



Source: Authors' construction, 2017

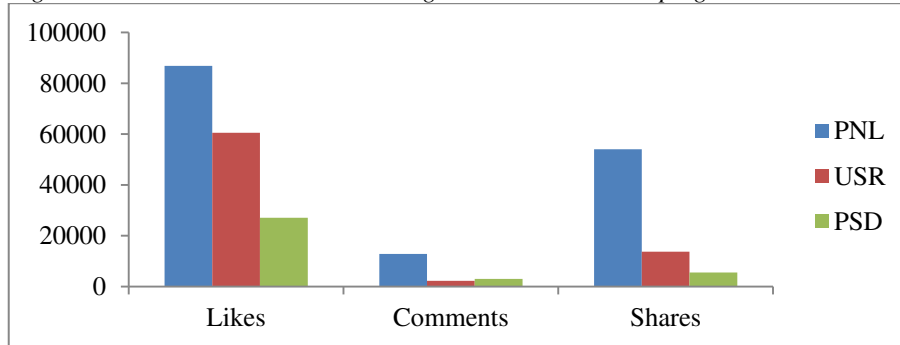
During the 2014 presidential campaign, candidate Klaus Iohannis run a very active and interactive campaign, published approximately 140 messages, with an average of 5 messages per day. His messages focused on getting closer to the users in order to gain their support. His attention was also directed towards his opponent, using predominantly emotion as an element of rhetoric. During the 2016 parliamentary campaign the strategy changed, the focus being on presenting the candidates. Therefore, the use of emotion is less notable and user interaction rather low. During the campaign, the three most popular parties published a total of 340 messages, the most active party being USR.

The 2014 presidential election triggered an alarm, demonstrating the importance of social networking in recent years. The 2016 parliamentary elections integrated social networks in the communication strategy, but they were only complementary means of disseminating the information and presenting the candidates, not focusing on truly interacting with the online voters.

In the case of parliamentary elections, posts that include pictures generate the most public reactions. A message containing a photo sums up approximately 1400 likes, is shared nearly 300 times and generates around 100 comments. Videos are shared in a proportion almost equal to the photos, but they receive fewer likes, an average of 700. The lowest response rate is generated by posts not containing multimedia elements. Overall, videos and photos generate the highest number of comments, likes and shares.

In the top of the most engaging parties PNL is the leader, with an average of nearly 2000 likes per message and a total over 85 000 likes (see Figure no. 3). The average of shares is 800 per message, with a total over 5000 shares during the campaign. PNL is also the party that generates the largest amount of discussion among online users, generating an average of 230 comments on the messages published during the November-December 2016 election campaign. It should be noted that in the case of PSD, user engagement on the page is also reduced due to the fact that some of the messages posted on the leader's page belong to other users, and these posts generate less user involvement. If these messages are eliminated, PSD obtains more likes on average than PNL, but fewer comments.

Figure no. 3 Facebook reactions during the 2016 online campaign: 12.11.2016 – 11.12.2016



Source: Authors' construction, 2017

If we turn our attention to the most popular posts, PNL is also the leader of the rankings, followed by USR. The most popular post - 32,186 likes, 3,425 shares and 4,256 comments - belongs to PNL as well and it endorses Dacian Ciolos as prime minister. For PSD, the messages that generate the most reactions from users feature party's leader, Liviu Dragnea, the case being the same for USR, its messages focusing on Nicusor Dan, the party's leader.

4. Conclusions

Social networks have become one of the most important tools when it comes to exchanging ideas. In a world increasingly interconnected due to globalization and information technology advance, social networks and the internet have become the newest space of discourse between citizens and governments.

The case study shows that compared to the 2014 presidential campaign, the 2016 parliamentary elections generated a low interest from the online voters, one of the reasons being that the political actors used the online campaign mostly a channel of disseminating information in order to get voters acquainted with the candidates and less a tool for mobilizing voters. Therefore, the online voters did not spread the information or engage with the candidates, things reflected in the online campaign's results.

As for our limitations, although it is the first comparative case study integrating the 2014 online presidential campaign and 2016 online parliamentary campaign, this sample is still a partial snapshot in the context of a massive campaign that started months before Election Day. Despite our limitations, the study generates valuable insight into online Romanian campaigns, that can be used in future research.

All in all, even though social networks have started to prove their importance, this field has yet to be exploited and even more when it comes to the political scene. Certainly, future progress will take a better look at the integration of social media in citizens' daily lives and the way they could lead to user engagement.

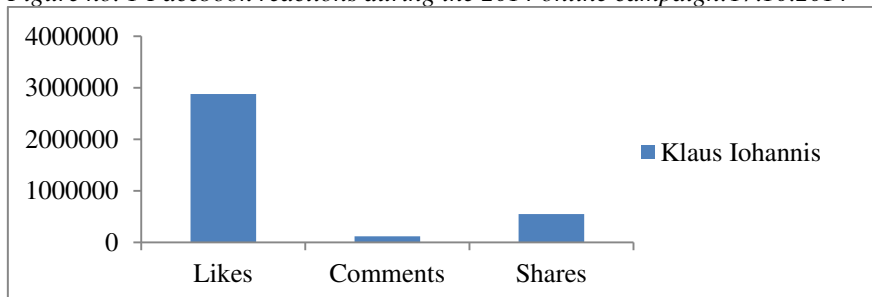
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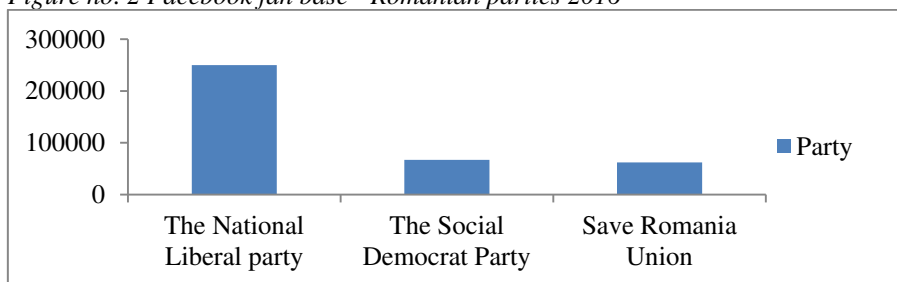
Appendix A

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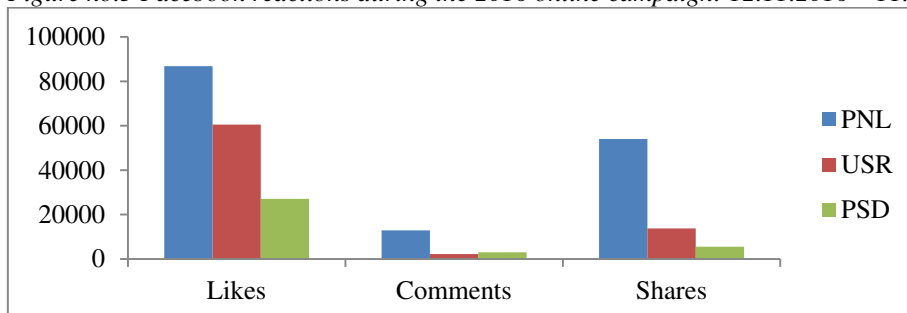
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