

## A Decade of Active Political Marketing on Social Media

Merlă Vladimir

*The Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies*

[vladimirmerla@gmail.com](mailto:vladimirmerla@gmail.com)

### Abstract

*Political marketing is a subject that has gained more and more attention, from both scholars, and the public, due to the political changes nowadays, and to the increased exposure brought by the Internet and the new means of communication. Social media marketing is addressing the new segments of population, which are intensely involved in their online life, and are reluctant to traditional media, such as TV and newspapers. As all marketers are focusing on being present on, and gaining as much as possible from the social platforms, political marketers are also integrating this into their strategies. The first success story to be attributed largely to the presence of social media in a campaign, is the one of Barack Obama's 2008 Presidential win, a moment that can be considered to be the real beginning of social media politics.*

**Key words:** marketing, political marketing, internet, social media, extremism

**J.E.L. classification:** M31

### 1. Introduction

In the second half of the last century, marketing started by being seen as a means of spreading the word in politics. Its role in the political strategy has risen to the point that, nowadays marketing is a central element in most political projects. The initial understanding of marketing, solely as newspaper and television coverage of the message, has faded away.

The first use of the Internet in a political campaign, is considered to have been in 1992, in the U.S.A., when Bill Clinton used a website to upload information for the journalists. Since then, the presence and impact of the new communicational tools and platforms, on the political life, is not to be ignored. In the early 2000's, blogging came to the spotlight, and the Internet's role as only a distribution channel for the message changed. From the 2004 elections, up to the 2008 round, the U.S. political market had evolved rapidly, with more and more social groups gaining a voice, and with more and more people getting involved in debates and political projects. As seen in most areas impacted by new technologies and platforms, the growth rate of social media usage and importance in politics has spiked.

In the 2008 Presidential win by Barack Obama, a central role was played by the supporters, who got involved through social media, and carried the candidate's message, proving to be more successful than the other channels of message distribution. This electoral campaign opened the road for a new level of involvement in politics, and offered practitioners and scholars all over the world an example of how problems, such as: political alienation, extremism, low turnout rates, etc., can be fought, for the general public's interest, with their help, and through their voice.

In this paper, I intend to gather different social media and electoral strategies, actions and results, in order to build a comprehensive overview of the evolution of social media political marketing, in the past ten years. In understanding the changes that happened, I will search for examples and arguments, both for and against the implementation of social media in political campaigning, while acknowledging the impressive successes of such approaches, in several cases, but, nevertheless, highlighting and exploring the potential problems and risks, that can and have emerged, due to the use of social media, and to its influence on people's life and on the political and social environment.

## **2. Theoretical background**

Marketing communication has evolved throughout the last decades, giving practitioners new instruments and platforms, that can connect them better and better with their target groups. Younger generations, which have lost interest in the political process, can be targeted through their media of choice, on the internet. Therefore, in the opinion of Jennifer Lees-Marshment, political websites can be a way of keeping in touch with supporters, of getting new voters and of communicating with the party members. Being present on platforms, such as Facebook and Youtube, is mandatory when addressing the youth, because these are channels, through which people do not only receive the message, but can also interact and engage. This way, social media offers a possibility of reconnecting with voters, and even more, the chance for them to be part of the political action and to gather together in online communities (Lees-Marshment, 2009, p.172).

Barrack Obama's 2008 campaign staff managed to engage grassroots supporters: to share the messages, to attract constant and important donations and to get involved like never before. The marketing strategy based on targeting young voters, and the internet-focused approach of the campaign, proved to be successful, so it can be said that they set the standard of new media usage, for elections to come. By identifying the young generation's needs and problems, but also by taking into consideration the social and technological changes, Obama got the vote of two thirds of them (Michaelsen, 2015).

Gaining the interest and the support of volunteers, meant for the Obama campaign that through the power of social media, websites and blogs, a new way of campaigning was rising. Their e-mail list consisted of 13 million people, the social media friends number reached 5 million, and there were 3 million people signed up for the text messaging program, that sent between 5 and 20 mobile phone messages per month (Okan et al, 2014, p135-136).

## **3. Methodology**

I have chosen a systematic literature review based research, on the social media impact on politics in the last 10 years. Starting from the 2008 U.S. Presidential elections, which can be seen as the beginning of this new chapter in politics, I have gathered information about the influence and the outcome of social media's instruments use, over politics and elections. The purpose of this paper is to bring a greater understanding of the use of social media in political marketing, and to underline its positive effects on societies, while keeping in mind that, as any tool, it can be used to do good or bad.

## **4. Findings**

As social media platforms, such as Facebook, Tweeter or Youtube, grow more and more, in terms of users, of time spent online, and of importance, ignoring them is becoming less of an option. Whether from a business organization's point of view, or from a political perspective, social media is part of our society, and it needs to be included in the guiding strategy, and addressed accordingly.

After the 2008 Obama success, the value of social media presence and interaction was beginning to get understood. In a study looking at the nominations for those elections, Christine Williams found out that, the Facebook activity and the success of a candidate can reflect his real life results, and, that all those who had a linkage between their offline campaign and online efforts, benefited from it. While still unable to replace traditional campaigning and its statistics, it offered realistic numbers, as an alternative to classic media indicators, such as expenditure, media coverage and presence, or gatherings. The one gaining the most from integrating online efforts into the strategy, was the candidate that had a high focus on this, and used social media alongside more classic communication efforts, this way reaching and bringing in votes from more social groups (Williams et al, 2008).

Step by step, the social networks have expanded, and gained more and more influence on everyday's life and society. In the years that past, social media marketing has grown in importance, and is nowadays present in almost every political strategy. On the other hand, the power of the social media has brought new problems or has resurfaced old ones. While helping candidates and new political parties break the old media and big parties monopoly, it did not always help the society in regard to the level or the implementation of democracy. For instance, social platforms helped people start the Arab Spring, made their voice be heard, in countries where this did not happen before, sparked the fight for democracy, but many of the nations that saw liberation and freedom of speech then, are now, years later, far away from the dream of democratic regimes, better life and better political representation.

In Europe, the main event on the political stages in the last 10 years, can be considered to be the new wave of extremist parties, and their anti-E.U. policies and movements. The grassroots implication model, that proved to be so successful in the U.S.A., was brought to the U.K., in the 2010 election. According to Rachel Gibson, the citizen-initiated campaigns were starting to be used, mostly by the big parties. Whilst social and cultural differences between the two nations lead to a slower adoption of such marketing actions, these campaigns proved to be a way of balancing the odds in the electoral communication (Gibson, 2015, p189-192).

Social platforms helped new political figures come into the spotlight, with their radical parties and anti-establishment messages. In 2016, the UKIP party, with its anti-European Union and anti-migration platform, convinced the British to vote for leaving the Union, in a referendum that left the country divided.

The choice for leaving the E.U. had multiple reasons, and the voters did not necessarily also chose UKIP in the internal elections. This occasion was used by many Britons, that were unhappy with politics in general, and with the political establishment, both from London and Brussels (Goodwin, 2016).

Many of the messages that the "Leave" campaign endorsed, proved to be only partially true or completely fake. Their aggressive perspective managed to catch the people's attention and to use social media as a channel of spreading impactful messages. The fear of migrants was fed by fake images and leaving the European Union, in order to protect the U.K. borders, was presented as the only option (Morrison, 2016).

Brexit is only one of the many challenges that the member states of the European Union face nowadays. Other referendums have been held and are to be held, and more and more euroscepticism is rising throughout Europe. Extremist parties have won, or are part of the ruling coalition, in countries such as: Poland, Austria, Hungary, Italy, or the Netherlands, where, in 2010, the social media impact on voters was considered to be in a starting phase (Effing et al, 2011, p. 30-32).

While consolidating the news spreading function, social media had gained lots of followers from the younger generations, that use to get all their information from these platforms, considering TV and newspaper old-fashioned. With this captivity and lack of access to other news outlets and resources, the concept of fake news appeared in the spotlight. Linked mostly with the election process, fake news can have a major impact, and sharing them, from user to user, creates a flow, that is usually not stopped by other users fact checking the news, from different sources. Facebook, the world's leading social media platform, has admitted that fake news spreading, alongside different hackings and manipulations, meant to promote certain messages and/or candidates, took place in the French elections, in the U.S.A. and during Brexit. Tens of thousands of fake accounts were closed, bots and internet 'trolls' were identified as being behind the profiles that massively shared fake information, but, in most cases, this happened after their goal was reached, or too late to stop, or control the impact.

The problem that drew the most negative attention on the impact of social media in politics, was the case of the U.S. Presidential elections from 2016. The winner, Donald Trump, had benefited from all sort of fake news, of an unprecedented level, ranging from alleged endorsement by popular figures, to aggressive attacks on his opponent, Hillary Clinton.

The scandal continues up to this day, with new insights. In addition to the fact that through Facebook foreign citizens or entities have targeted American electors, and have influenced their vote, there are links to a case of millions of people affected by data collecting and profiling. This became known to the public in 2018, and it has changed the way both scholars and voters look at the choic-

es they made, when it is more and more clear, that social media permitted only certain content to reach them.

## 5. Conclusions

Ten years ago, after Barack Obama won the Presidency of the U.S.A, a new era began for politics, marketing and social media. The role of political marketing can not be understated anymore, to the sole function of a communication tool, for the politician. The election results showed that the use of marketing can push the candidate to success, and that social media finally had a very important use in society being here to stay.

The positive impact, that social media platforms can bring to the political life, is far from being totally explored or understood. Bringing the candidates and the voters closer, facilitating the exchange of ideas between all kinds of people, getting young generations to vote, and re-engaging those who have not voted for long, the possibility for less-known candidates or projects to surface, and the breaking of the major parties bias, are all good for the society.

Apart from the many positive features that social media marketing has brought, there are many drawbacks that we are starting to see. Although extremism's return to Europe, mostly in the form of far-right parties, is not to be blamed on the new media platforms, because they only gave a voice to new or overlooked politicians, it is certain that without the use of this channels, dividing messages, fake news and hate speech would not have returned or expanded, with such power and coverage. The barrier that the TV, radio and newspapers imposed in their coverage of politics, is starting to disappear, as these traditional media channels are seeing their importance fade away, and are starting to focus on spreading their news through online media as well, in order to remain relevant or even to stay on the market

The expansion of social media marketing in politics is happening extremely fast, with noticeable changes, from year to year. Although all around the world consultants are starting to implement social media strategies to the campaigns, the development is not unitary, and the role of these platforms can differ greatly from one candidate to the other, or from one country to its neighbor. Hence, considering building a framework for the implementation of social media marketing in a political project is almost impossible, at a general level. The specificity of the country, of every society, the technology, the internet adoption and usage, and the candidate's history or profile are just few of the criteria, that should be taken into consideration, when formulating a coherent strategy.

Social media is a part of everyday life, not only for the Millennials or Generation Z, but for a growing part of the general public. The impact that platforms such as Facebook, Tweeter and Youtube have had in recent elections, is transforming our lives, our understanding of public policy making and the way we are governed. An appeal for greater transparency is mandatory, both from the platforms, and from the publishers and politicians, so that social media will not be the place for an ongoing campaign, with unethical or illegal profiling, with uncensored messages, fake news, hate speech and without campaign money tracking or justification.

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