THE INFLUENCE OF COMMUNICATION IN 140 CHARACTERS ON ROMANIAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

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ABSTRACT

The new media have changed the political scene dramatically. Thus, in the case of certain states such as the USA, Iran or Moldova, microblogging - especially through the platform Twitter - proved an efficient communication tool. But what was the case of Romania, considering that, at the end of 2009, presidential elections were held here?

The aim of our paper is to share an analysis carried out by the authors which explores whether communication in 140 characters has had an/any influence on the Romanian presidential elections. The paper was facilitated by the online project *Elections in 140 characters* developed on the microblogging platform Cirip.eu, by creating at the start of the campaign a group dedicated to the presidential elections. Hence, on 22 October 2009, the group Prezidentiale (http://cirip.ro/grup/prezidentiale) became active (and it was open until the end of the elections, in mid December). Messages on this topic were sent in this group, and were also imported both from Twitter and from blogs, all of them reflecting the interaction/debate on the elections, between Romanian Internet users.

However, the authors believe that if microblogging is used effectively it has the potential to do more than facilitate interaction between users (or users and candidates). More precisely, we consider it can influence electoral campaigns in a new and innovative way.

Key words: microblogging, politics, Romania, elections, Twitter, Cirip

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The slideshare of this presentation can be accessed here: http://www.slideshare.net/ggrosseck/microblogging-meets-politics-4620107

INTRODUCTION

With the advent of new media and social media, mainstream media have lost their monopoly over the coverage of political news and debates. Thus, the Internet has become an important medium for various forms of political communication and participation in recent years. There is broad agreement that new technologies such as blogs, social networks and microblogging platforms gave citizens an unimagined ability to filter and personalize the information to which they are exposed, while at the same time dramatically increasing the amount and range of information which is available to them, and hence the possibility of perceptual overload and the need for selective exposure (Iyengar, 2001).

However, there is only a relatively small number of studies showing in detail what people actually do when they are online (Pew Internet, 2009; JISC, OECD). According to the Digital Future Report 2009, the most popular Internet activities are playing online video games, listening to online radio, reading the online editions of newspapers, and watching online television and online movies.

Data provided by Trafic.ro[26] for 2008 indicate that the situation is the same for Romania, Internet users here being interested less in politics and more in information about entertainment. Statistics made by various research institutes in Romania show constantly that politics is not a top subject of online discussions for Romanian netizens (Gutu, 2007). Entertainment, sports and shopping are favorite topics of online discussions and searches, politics not making even the top ten. Nevertheless, the interest for political information seems to grow during election times or important political events, for instance the NATO summit, European elections, and presidential elections, as we shall see later.

MICROBLOGGING MEETS POLITICS: AN OVERVIEW

In some states, microblogging, especially through Twitter, proved to be an efficient political communication tool. It has all started from the huge success of the American president Barack Obama online campaign in 2008, which was immediately replicated in other countries. In the UK and Germany, for example, microblogging was used also during electoral campaigns both by staffs/candidates and by citizens (Anderson, 2009; Jungherr, 2010; Tumasjan, Sprenger, Sandner, Welpe, 2010). On the other hand, in countries like Iran and Moldova it was employed by ordinary people as a means to voice their opinions against the political regime (Burns, Eltham, 2009). For instance, the so-called Twitter Revolution from Moldova in April 2009, marked by the tag #pman (short for The Great National Assembly Plaza) was one of the most popular topics on Twitter. The political analysts Evgeny Morozov (2010) and Alina Mungiu-Pippidi (2009) have written extensively about this event.

Microblogging was also used during the European Parliament elections in 2009. Thus, the site europatweets.eu aimed to connect the public with politics. Under the slogan „What is Europe doing?" it tried to promote a better and more transparent communication between voters and candidates/members of the European Parliament. Another site, TweetElect09.eu (http://tweetelect.com/), gathered all the messages posted about the European Elections on the microblogging service Twitter using the tag #eu09, thus enabling people to have an overall picture about the candidates and their campaign moves.

In Romania too, the global trend of employing microblogging, along other social media channels as a communication tool in electoral campaigns, has caught on. From candidates to the presidential seat, who created accounts with the obvious intention of convincing people to vote for them, as Popescu (2009) notices, to politicians, parties, campaign staff, to NGOs and netizens, we witnessed an explosion of Romanian microblogging accounts. Hence, according to Zelist.ro, in Romania during the elections, around 30,000 Twitter accounts existed. It is interesting to note that

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[26] the most important Romanian provider of Internet statistics

in subregions, microblogging is apparently most popular in Timis / Timisoara – where the Revolution started in December 1989.

Since the previous elections in 2004, the number of Internet users has increased with one of the highest growth rates, now almost one third of Romanians having access to the Internet (2009); notably, a larger number of such persons are registered in urban areas. Consequently, the online presence of politicians has extended most major parties and candidates having a website that includes links to their blog, Facebook, Youtube and Flickr accounts. Yet, as far as specific Web 2.0 applications, such as microblogging, are concerned, *can we consider online presence in 140 characters a major factor of change in electoral campaigns*, as the one that were organized at the end of 2009?

Those presidential elections took place in a different political, economic and social context from the one five years ago, because it was organized:

- after Romania joined the EU;
- after a 5-year presidential term;
- without coinciding with elections for parliament (held in 2008);
- it used/appealed to a mature social media, taking place online both on dedicated sites and on blogs / microblogs (and other social networks such as Facebook, YouTube, Flickr).

For Romanian online politics, microblogging proved to be an "open space, with no clear boundaries" that was beneficial to the political environment (Dumitru, 2009). The use of this technology has changed the power balance in the relation between the Internet and the public opinion, with users having a more active attitude in transmitting information and becoming aware that they can make their voices heard (see also O'Connory, Balasubramanyany, Routledgex, Smithy, 2010). Half of the Romanian presidential candidates (6 out of a total of 12) had microblogging accounts during the electoral campaign (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Microblogging accounts of the presidential candidates
Source: http://tweepml.org/Candidati

Given the specific topic of this paper, the use of several technical terms is inevitable. Therefore, for a more comprehensive perspective, it is necessary to clarify certain notions and terms. The following section includes several definitions of important technological elements required for a better understanding of this paper.

TECHNICAL BACKGROUND

Microblogging is considered one of the most important Web 2.0 technologies of the year 2009. It allows users to publish online brief text updates in 140-200 characters (sometimes images and video too). The posts can be accessed online, by mobile phone, by e-mail, via instant messaging clients, and by third party applications. Usually, the authors of microblogs export their posts as a widget on blogs or sites. Through platforms as Twitter, Identi.ca, Tumblr, Plurk, Edmodo, Cirip etc, microblogging has mashed up communication and personal publishing to create a compelling new form of real-time publishing. Twitter has "the most spectacular ascending curve", with 190 million users (May 2010) and a large variety of uses (Malita et al., 2010).

In the spring of 2008, under the coordination of the first author, was launched Cirip.eu, a microblogging platform especially designed for education and business. The implementation was realized by Timsoft (http://www.timsoft.ro), a company specialized in eLearning and mobile applications.

In addition to the facilities of other microblogging platforms, Cirip.eu provides the following:

- Embedding multimedia objects in the notes: images, video clips, audio and (live) video files, live-streaming, presentations, cognitive visualizations like diagrams or mindmaps etc (Figure 2).
- Creating public or private user groups. Groups have an announcements section (Group News), where moderators can post notes and materials for the group activities.
- Sending and receiving messages via the web, mobile version, SMS, IM (Yahoo and Jabber), e-mail, Firefox/Chrome extensions, API, desktop and other 3rd party applications; notes can also be imported from Twitter, RSS.
- Monitoring RSS feeds for sites, blogs, or activities on other social networks or search feeds.
- Tagging the content.
- Creating and conducting polls and quizzes (which can be answered online or by SMS).
- Visualizing statistics and representations of the users/groups interaction networks.

Figure 2. Posting multimedia notes on Cirip.eu

The interface is in Romanian, English and German, facilitating an international collaboration, around 10% of the 15000 users being foreigners. The Cirip.eu platform featured *Top 100 Tools for Learning 2009*, published by Jane Hart, from the Centre for Learning & Performing Technologies in Great Britain (Hart, 2009).

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Because the research field in itself is new in Romania, investigating such a topic could only be done through an explorative type of research, meant to provide a first image of the phenomenon. Consequently, the aim of our research is to make a preliminary evaluation of a new social reality, without attempting to draw any political marketing communication strategies, since that is outside our field of expertise. Thus, this initial analysis can lay the foundation for the elaboration of ulterior and more thorough research, which is also reflected in our work hypothesis:

Could communication through microblogging have an/any influence on the Romanian Presidential Election campaign? In other words, why did Romanian politicians turn to microblogging? Perhaps because the technology with the biggest growth rate in social media is a form of expression which does not require great technical knowledge about the way in which information is published? Or perhaps because interacting with one's electorate is essential in politics and microblogging offers an easy way of achieving this goal.

Our research was facilitated by the online project *Elections in 140 characters* developed on the microblogging platform Cirip.eu, by creating at the start of the campaign a public group dedicated to the presidential elections. Hence, on 22 October 2009, the Presidential group became active and it was open until the end of the elections, in mid December (Figures 3, 4).
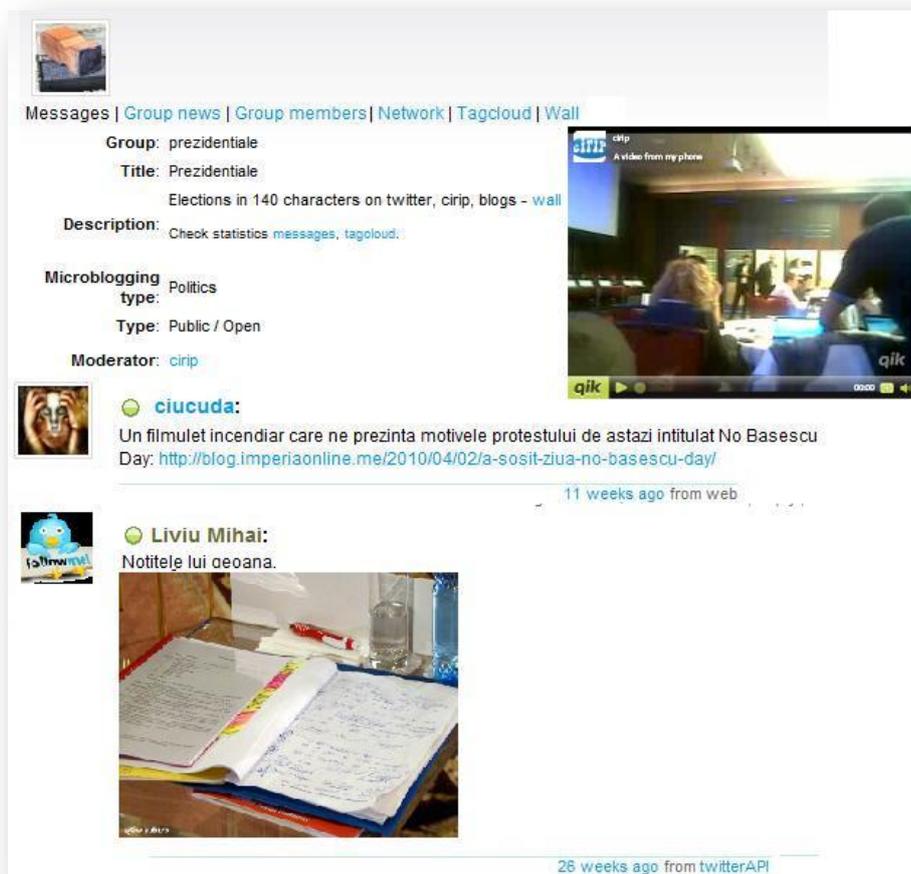

Figure 3. Presidential group (*Prezidentiale* in Romanian)
Source: http://cirip.ro/grup/prezidentiale

Figure 4. The first and the last message in the group

The group was organized by the authors and had as members users of Cirip interested in the presidential electoral campaign. The aims of the group were:

- to constitute a framework for communication and debates
- to be a source of real-time information
- to offer access to all the group content, visualisations, and statistics in order be informed during the campain, but also for future reflections and research.

Besides the multimedia notes sent by the members, the group also gathered:

- tweets referring to the campain imported using the Twitter search API, and
- blogs posts which mentioned the elections, found by the Twingly search engine API.

In this way the group messages reflect the interaction/debate on the elections between Romanians on Twitter, Cirip and blogs.

The content of the group and its information flow were enlarged with feeds/search feeds on elections monitored by the group members using the platform corresponding facility.

The group contains more than 42,000 messages: around 88% were imported from Twitter, 2% were sent by Cirip users, and 10% are posts from blogs. We should note that the messages in this group represent an important part of the messages in 140 characters exchanged about the campaign on Twitter, Cirip and blogs. The real number of messages could be higher, the difference is given by the fact that Cirip users could send some notes on campaign outside the group, on public timeline; also the search terms used to import messages from Twitter and blogs could impose some limits on locating them.

Because the messages imported from Twitter were written by more than 5,000 Twitterers and there were 30,000 accounts during elections, it follows that a sixth of Romanian Twitterers have participated in debates in 140 characters (Figure 5). A much lower percentage of Cirip users have participated, as the platform is mainly used for education and marketing purposes.

Figure 5: Statistics of group members and messages

DATA ANALYSIS

Starting from Jungherr's (2010) recommendations, we have decided to present the results from the group *Prezidentiale* regarding the use of microblogging in political communication on three coordinates: COMMUNITY, COMMUNICATION and CONVERSATION (Figure 6).
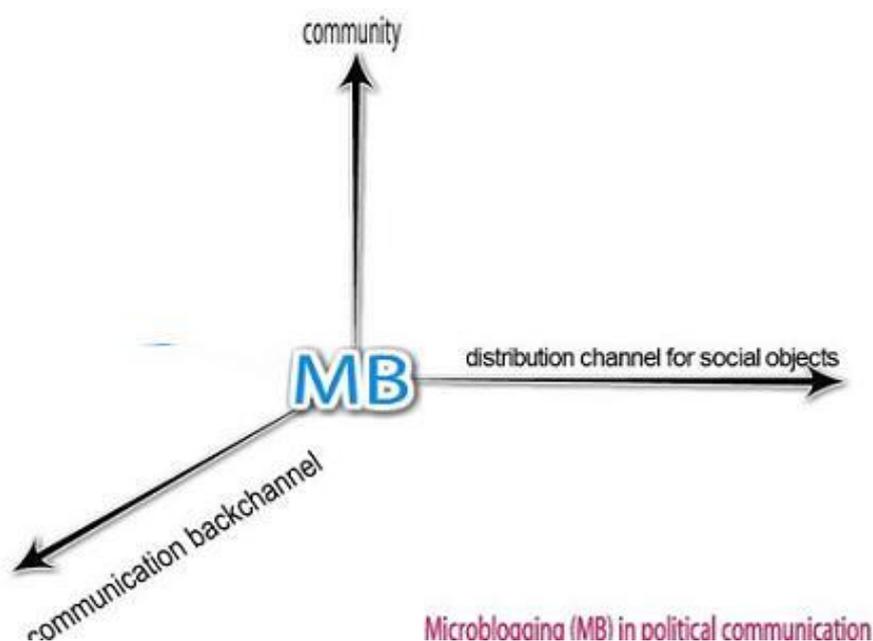

Figure 6. The 3C of political communication on microblogging

a) Microblogging as COMMUNITY building. When discussing microblogging as community building, it is obvious that within the *Prezidentiale* group was established an online community, with intricate lines of discussion and influence from candidates to regular users and vice versa. The microblogging / microcontent elements helped users to connect and socialize naturally. Therefore, potential voters made their voices and opinions heard by politicians and their electoral staffs. The process demonstrated the validity of Kohen's statement (2010): „*microblogging can break down barriers between people who are generally perceived to be far away from us in some way*". The statistics provided by Cirip indicate several important quantitative aspects (see Figure 7).

To what extent did the candidates themselves and their campaign staffs provide up-to-date information, facilitated dialogue or answered the messages addressed by other users?

Looking at the Twitter accounts of the candidates (see Table 1), some common characteristics can be noticed:

- the accounts were opened at the moment the campaign started, or not long before it
- messages were written in first person (except @sorinoprescu – in the third person) and contain announcements, events, links to other resources, but rarely interactions with other users
- follow a small number of users, except @Mircea_Geoana and @remuscernea
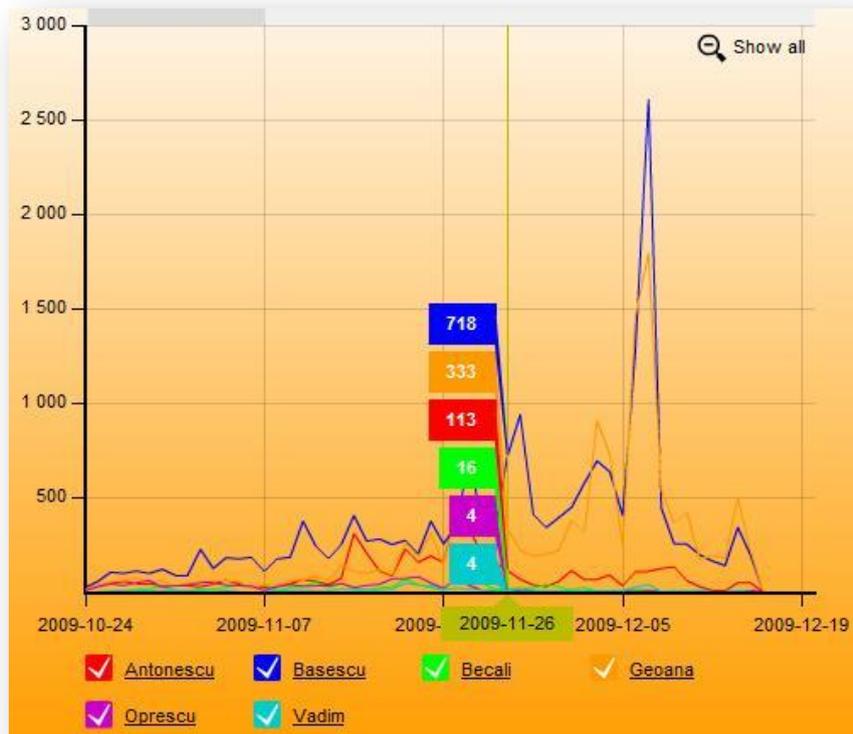- stayed active after the elections too, except @hunorkelemen.

Figure 7. Number of messages mentioning different candidates

We can conclude that except @remuscernea, the candidates did not participate effectively in the debates in 140 characters, because the number of messages is reduced, and only a few are addressed directly to other users; they do not try to interact or to pick up/comment/analyze problems raised by users, in order to gain new/more votes. But it is a good point that almost all continued to be active after the end of the campaign.

Table 1. Twitter accounts of candidates during the campaign

Account	Number of messages	Following	Followers	Messages addressed by other users	Messages addressed to other users	Links in messages	Date of opening	Account still active
CrinAntonescu09	46	81	1065	351	2	20	27.08.09	Yes
remuscernea	430	1642	1420	168	102	318	03.09.09	Yes
sorinoprescu	88	1314	748	185	0	10	05.10.09	Yes
tbasescu	38	14	2873	1801	7	7	08.10.09	Yes
Mircea_Geoana	195	798	1089	879	11	65	27.10.09	Yes
hunorkelemen	81	84	189	6	2	32	30.09.09	No

b) Microblogging as COMMUNICATION BACKCHANNEL to political events. Debates from traditional mass-media, such as TV and radio shows, printed press articles, documentaries, round tables, or even meetings with the electorate were all either disseminated (retransmitted on Twitter/Cirip - RT/RC), or discussed with arguments in favor or against on microblogging platforms.

The tagcloud in Figure 8, automatically built by Cirip and displayed in a dedicated zone of the *Prezidentiale* group, shows that comments about the candidates and vote preferences prevail.

Figure 8. Tagcloud on a sample of 200 messages randomly chosen from the group

Tagclouds are built according to the criteria: terms, users, and links, which gave every member of the Cirip community the possibility to find out what were the most discussed or mentioned topics, users and resources during the campaign. These configurations are also useful for post-campaign analyses.

We can also compare them with the way in which information about candidates was reflected in traditional media (TV channels and news portals) (Figure 9).

As far as political activism is concerned, campaign staffs should learn how to use the microblogging technology correctly, in order to grasp what types of activities politicians can / should carry out on such a platform and, more importantly, how these will be evaluated.
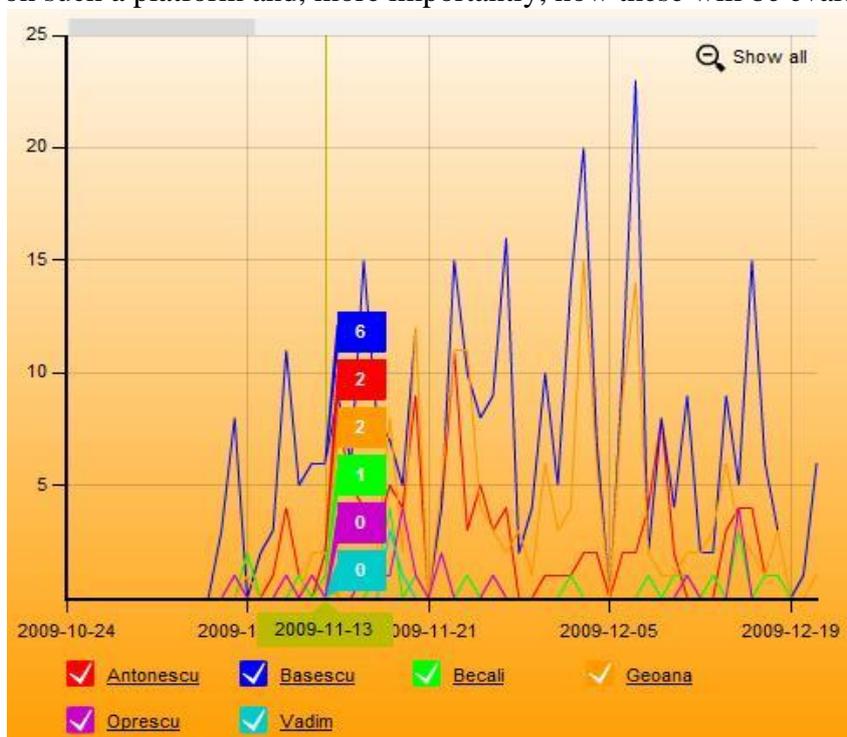

Figure 9. The evolution of messages on the most important traditional media channels
Source: http://www.cirip.ro/cirip/chart2

c) Microblogging as DISTRIBUTION CHANNEL for social objects. In 2005 Jyri Engestrom, the co-developer of the Jaiku microblogging platform, launched a theory stating that, in most cases, people base their relations on certain objects, which he named „social objects". These can be both physical, such as „location", and semi-physical, such as „attention" or even conceptual, such as „on-line presence". Engestrom claims that people do not interact with each other, but rather by way of certain objects imposing a common value. According to this theory, which seems extremely flexible when approaching microblogging as social networks, objects become the centre of any social relation and the nucleus/fundamental notions of a (strong) social network.

Networks can thus be formed around these objects, connecting people with objects, objects with people, objects with objects and, perhaps, people with people. In microblogging, the social object is clear: the online presence, i.e. what you want to do online. The livestream can be supplied online or in various ways, from using SMS, a desktop or mobile client, to more automatic entries by adding an RSS feed to the microblogging service used.

Cirip allows the creation of a personal profile / portfolio including ideas, projects, research, and information resources, multimedia objects created individually or collaboratively. From this perspective we can say that Cirip is a profile-centric network, according to classification of Stutzman (2009) and analysis of Conole-Culver (2009). Because Cirip.eu integrates a wide range of Web2.0 applications and social networks organized around resources, it is a social network constituted around multimedia objects, thus also an object-centric network. By extension, public or private groups can be considered social objects.

In the group we can identify campaign posters / caricatures / collages in image format, audio / video clips of electoral remixes, various presentations or documents, as well as links to articles that had been posted by other users, all of which are multimedia objects (see Table 2). Because we are dealing with a Push and Pull type of content, the interaction created around these objects was the most relevant aspect.

Table 2: Type of messages

Messages: 41533 Users: • Cirip: 55 • Twitter: 5242	Links in messages: 21942 Multimedia objects in messages: • Audio: 51 • Images: 344 • Video: 641 • Live Video: 42 • Presentations: 62 • Files: 54 Polls: 5

FINAL REMARKS

It is noteworthy that, after the end of the second ballot, the candidates / staffs reduced the information flow. The same does not hold true for the voters, who continued to write and exchange information and ideas about the past electoral process. Our study indicates that microblogging's role in this campaign was limited, most probably its immediate role being strictly to mobilize people to go out and cast their vote. Although the intention was to replicate the American pattern at national level, it did not quite materialize to the same extent.

Yet, did communication on microblogs influence the citizens' opinions and did it turn them into active participants in the campaign and in debates? The short answer is: probably not. However, it succeeded to prompt political actors, as well as citizens, to relate to the three components described above.

Therefore, the group can be considered a time capsule that stores messages in 140 characters sent by candidates, campaign staffs, and most importantly, by netizens. This time capsule can be used for future research:

- an analysis of the involvement of staffs and candidates in the political marketing communication strategy on social media channels;
- a statistic image of the campaign, reflecting the number, age, geographical distribution of participants, as well the percentages of fans/supporters of different candidates;
- the use of mobile tools in communication etc.

At the time of writing this article, six months have passed since presidential elections took place in Romania. It remains to be seen whether in the next four years we shall be able to convince people to participate in the democratic process, to be more active in the political field by using microblogs (and not just blogs or other social networks such as Facebook for instance), and to improve their civic attitude towards the electoral process.

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Rezumat

Noile media precum blogurile, reţelele sociale au schimbat dramatic peisajul politic. Astfel, în cazul unor state precum SUA, Iran, Moldova, microbloggingul - în special platforma Twitter - s-a dovedit a fi un instrument eficient de comunicare. Care este însă cazul României, în contextul în care alegerile prezidenţiale s-au derulat în 2009 într-un context diferit faţă de cele de acum cinci ani, fiind primele alegeri:

- după aderarea României la UE;
- ce nu au coincis cu alegerile parlamentare;
- au avut loc după un mandat de cinci ani;
- social media a devenit matură, campania electorală desfăşurându-se online pe site-uri dedicate, precum blogurile, Facebook, YouTube, Flickr şi microbloguri.

Analiza realizată de autoarele acestui articol se concentrează asupra impactului pe care comunicarea în 140 de caractere, pe platformele de microblogging Twitter şi Cirip a avut-o asupra alegerilor prezidenţiale din România, umărindu-se aspectele:

- implicarea staff-urilor şi a candidaţilor în strategia comunicării de marketing politic;
- influenţa comunicării pe microbloguri a opiniilor cetăţenilor şi cum i-a facut participanţi activi în campanile prin dezbateri online;
- numărul de participanţi, procentele de simpatizanţi/susţinători pentru diferiţi candidaţi, elemente multimedia folosite în comunicare, subiecte abordate, utilizare instrumente mobile în comunicare etc.

Studiul a fost facilitat de proiectul online *Prezidentiale (*http://cirip.ro/grup/prezidentiale*)*, un grup dedicat pe platforma de microblogging Cirip.eu considerat ca o capsulă a timpului care păstrează mesajele în 140 de caractere ale candidaţilor, ale staff-urilor de campanie şi ale cetăţenilor.

Cuvinte cheie: microblogging, politică, România, alegeri prezidenţiale, Twitter, Cirip