ROMANIAN POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS IN THE AGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Gabriel STOICIU[1]

Abstract*: From public announcers and wall inscriptions to press and the audiovisual, any possible way of spreading the news became instantly an attractive opportunity for promoting people, products or ideas. Social Media made no exception – here, more than any other time or place, anything goes. Romania's political agenda has witnessed various challenges raised by NGOs since the early 2000's. This paper analyses few examples of Romanian political (and social) campaigns promoted and supported through Social Media. In present times, Social Media can prove to be the optimal instrument able to help us engage social actions and nurture communities of interest united by the aspiration of trying to change the world. Nevertheless, in times of great concerns, Social Media can prove to be as much damaging as it is useful.*

Keywords: *Social Media, political campaigns, civic engagement, activism, digital studies*

Introduction

The Social Media has become in the last decade the main resource for activities in the field of information and communication. Both audience and news professionals rely more and more on the insightfulness of the contributive content of Social Media. This new modus operandi encompasses the use and abuse of subjective perception of communication actors.

Nevertheless, on interpersonal level, the textual exchanges provided and promoted by virtual platforms remain limited and confusing in capturing the emotional landscape surrounding the communicational content. Misunderstandings and even unintended antagonisms arise frequently during phone or computer chats and they are poorly managed by emoticons or funny GIFs. The enormous gain of web 2.0 is the light-speed dissemination of news *en masse* and, consequently, the intensive feedback in a 'snowball effect' fashion. This feature allows a better response to crisis by the official authorities and more comprehensive awareness raising policies and programs aimed towards a constantly enlarging audience.

Marketing gurus and political strategists jumped instantly to these opportunities given by social media, hijacking this new way of freedom through appealing, persistent and perverted meanings into a money-making path. Youth slang seems to evolve more and

---

[1] Senior Researcher at the 'Francisc Rainer' Institute of Anthropology, Bucharest; e-mail: gabriel.stoiciu@gmail.com

more from a group-specific code to a universal advertisement induced babbling. At the same time, collective emotions tend to be more superficial - drifting from consistent aspirations to a better life. A cascade of basic but overwhelming affects caused by sensational events and overnight success 'stories' massively populating the Social Media is responsible for early depression among young people who are accusing increasingly stressful and frustrating daily life. They are experiencing emotions produced by an addictive vicious circle revolving around neophilia-driven consumerism and accumulation of waste composed by out-fashioned belongings - a 'gold-mine' for capitalist economic development.

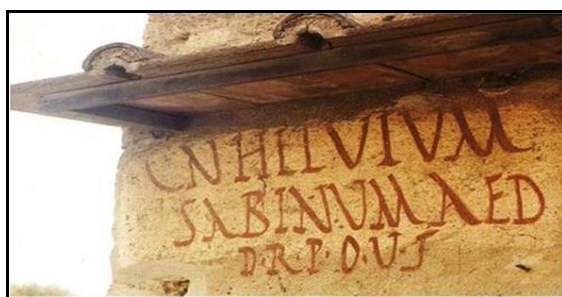# 1. Social Impact of Political Campaigns

Besides its enormous commercial opportunities, Internet has proven its ability to transform the society making possible through its potential of generating social capital (Putnam, 2000) the establishment of virtual communities (Rheingold, 1993) and ultimately the development of cyberculture (Escobar et al., 1994). Social pressure leading to civic unrest is usually released either through individual anomic behavior or through collective public protest. These movements can re-shape political specter and, according to their intensity and amplitude, they can induce abruptly or gradually specific or fundamental changes.

It is the case of most recent social movements aimed at bad practices perpetrated by actors coming from the three most important bodies at the top of the society:

- some players from the 'big industry' recklessly damaging the environment

- representatives of the political elite causing precarisation through corrupted behavior

- certain religious leaders promoting intolerance and ignorance, thus recruiting fanatics.

Social actions are frequently ignited by political campaigns carried out by groups which may or may not be affiliated to partisan entities. When a suffrage event is approaching, these actions are ultimately assimilated to electoral campaigns. Such occurrences happened even 2000 years ago. An illustrative example is the inscription on a wall in Pompei standing as a campaign poster.

Figure 1. Cn(aeum) Helvium / Sabinum aed(ilem)/ d(ignum) r(ei) p(ublicae) o(ro) v(os) f(aciatis) /
(Please elect mayor Helvius Sabinus, worthy of public function - inscription in Pompeii)

Source: http://en.antiquitatem.com/pompeii-electoral-graffiti-aedile-iivir (accessed on 07.09.2022)

Besides the textual message, still or moving images are the elements that bring the ultimate impact to a political or social campaign. The groundbreaking invention of printing press by Guttenberg allowed the multiplication and dissemination of written content to an ever-growing number of people. However, it was lithographic technique discovered by Alois Senefelder that made possible the existence of the modern newspapers and magazines. With telegraphs at first and telephone later on, facilitating the circulation of news faster than any vehicle could ever grant, mass-media was on its way of becoming democracies' watchdog.

There are numerous examples of printed poster images promoted during a campaign which remained persistent afterwards in collective conscience. The vivid electoral system of United States embraced almost instantly the opportunity of passing a graphical embellished message to the voters. Consequently, John Quincy Adams became the first presidential candidate to widely use posters in 1824, according to the University of Virginia's Miller Center (Hogan, n.d.). A famous historical example of such images transformed in cultural stereotypes is the recruitment poster of Royal Navy and its variation promoted by US Army. These posters were published during WW I have as central characters the British admiral Lord Kitchener and the fictional character Uncle Sam. Their impact was so powerful and persistent making them recurring illustration for different campaigns (such as job recruiting) through the decades till present time.

Figure 2. Uncle Sam and Lord Kitchener Illustrations

Sources: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uncle_Sam, accessed on 07.09.2022;
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lord_Kitchener_Wants_You, accessed on 07.09.2022

Advertising campaigns have experienced important transformations with the expansion of mass media and multimedia. The widespread use of these technologies seems to cause a decrease in the impact of classic posters in favor of 'viral' video clips or funny "memes" used in online campaigns. However, both for financial reasons and due to important cultural considerations, we cannot yet imagine an advertising campaign (especially an election) that would not also include promotion through posters. This method of electoral advertisement still has a powerful impact, especially in the rural

environment of developing countries. Here, computerization and even audio-visual have limited penetration, these technologies presupposing the purchase of devices whose minimum prices often exceed the financial possibilities of the households located in these areas.

Both modern and contemporary history dedicate an important place to voting campaigns because elections - these peaceful changes of regime, marked sometimes the beginning of social transformation with international reverberations. Electoral campaigns usually have in mind the promotion of political organizations in two directions: the promotion of their representatives and the promotion of defining ideas for their doctrines. Starting from the basic principles of cognitive psychology which state that the personification of some ideas facilitates the reception of those ideas by the public, most electoral campaigns, even in the case of list voting, emphasize building and maintaining the popularity of the candidates.

The democratization of political life provided, first and foremost, the possibility for a nation to choose its leaders and not having some imposed ones, either by heredity or by a sovereign. Therefore, the politics, like any other area in Western societies, were gradually conquered by the logic of supply and demand. The promotion of politicians as candidates has acquired the same level of well strategized professionalization as seen in campaigns devoted to consumer products. The political competition, nowadays, encompasses logistical and financial efforts at least as important as the ones involved in the advertising competition between, for example, two large detergent manufacturers (the classic example of choice by comparison strategy) which stands under the motto: our product is a better than this unnamed brand.

From public announcers and wall inscriptions to press and the audiovisual, any possible way of spreading the news became instantly an attractive opportunity for promoting people, products or ideas. Social Media made no exception – here, more than any other time or place, anything goes. Through the Internet, spamming and guerilla marketing reached their apogee. Even the oddest products or the most peculiar popularity chaser can get an audience, although it goes without saying that the 'lion's share' is taken by the largest corporations. For what it's worth, an important novelty brought by Social Media, is the fulfilment of establishing for the first time a genuine active audience. The recipient, wherever in the world, has now the possibility to react almost instantly (Miller, 2011) through mobile devices like smartphones and tablet computers.

2. Social Media Platforms as Realms of Social Engagement

"Web 2.0 environment is characterized by a shift from static online content to dynamic co-creation. The recipients (readers, listeners) can participate and communicate either with each other (i.e. on the recipient level), with the producers (i.e. reversing the traditional one-way pattern of communication) or with other audiences (i.e. attaining the status of co-authors)". (Chovanec and Dynel, 2015: 7). Unfortunately, this means consumer reports, false advertising and slander can go hand-in-hand in this virtual world. The mirage of cyberspace also raised concerns about privacy and media

addiction. Migration from consumer to user status does not represent just a funny coincidence with the narcotics' phenomenon. The need for social affiliation fuels the compulsion in both cases and the self-control seems to be permanently damaged. "…it is clear in 2021, that Social Media companies have outsized power to influence how we access information, communicate with those around us, and develop our views of the world." (Myers West, 2022: 5). These pressure points are used in some of the most creative ways by commercial and social agents.

Social campaigns occupied in late 20th century a very important place in developed countries' cultures. Discrimination, poverty, pollution, world peace and healthcare represent some of most important issues reflected in campaigns since the 1960's, remaining, unfortunately, just as much relevant in present days as they used to be. Environmental concerns raised decade by decade as the mass dissemination of news about horrible polluting accidents and worrisome scientific data. "Most campaigns involve at least one of four goals: to inform, raise awareness, and shape public understanding about the science, problems, and politics of climate change; to change consumer and citizen behavior; to network and connect concerned publics; to visibly mobilize consumers or citizens to put pressure on decision-makers." (Segeberg, 2017). These levels of involvement characterized at least 3 types of roles which an individual can adopt nowadays while confronted with a matter of public concern: slacktivism (a passive online support), e-activism (a regular online and offline support) and hacktivism (a fanatic of the cause committing radical, damaging actions online and/or offline). All three roles encompass the essence of networking democracy (Loader and Mercea, 2011). From this point of view, NGO-s (Pezzullo and Cox, 2006) share a common methodology with political parties and religious cults: they shape core values, recruit followers, and obstinately promote their main ideas.

3. Twenty Years of Online Social and Political Activism in Romania

Romania's political agenda has witnessed various challenges raised by NGO-s since the early 2000's A vivid environmentally-oriented campaign called „Salvati Rosia Montana" (Save Rosia Montana – an ancient village in Transylvania) marked the first social movement to employ Internet platforms as an awareness raising instrument. Its main goal was opposing the inauguration at Rosia Montana of the largest European gold mine using cyanides as extraction methods. Protests against central and local authorities began in front of the local City Hall in 2000-2001, condemning the authorities' abuse towards the Rosia Montana community as they were trying to create the legal and administrative framework for the gold mining industry in the area, which would have impacted "740 households and 140 apartments and meant destroying invaluable historical and archeological heritage" (http://www.streetdelivery.ro/bucuresti/so-cietate-civila-ecologie/salvati-rosia-montana-247.html). The revolted locals organized themselves in Alburnus Maior association. Though at first spontaneous, the protests attracted attention from several student communities in large university centers. As in most cases of contemporary social movements "micro-mobilization context acted as launching pad" (Stoiciu, 2019)

Figure 3. Protest in Bucharest, 2003. From the „Salvați Roșia Montană" archive

Source: https://www.scena9.ro/article/18-ani-de-salvat-rosia-montana, accessed 07.09.2022

Students from Cluj, Bucharest, Iasi and Timisoara came up with the imagery, the slogans and the informative materials which were initially distributed throughout the streets of Romania's major cities, and next online.

Figure 4. The Logo „Salvați Roșia Montană" in 2004 and the first poster of "Fan Fest" Festival

Source: https://www.dor.ro/istoric-salvati-rosia-montana/ (accessed 07.09.2022)

One event that maintained the spirit of this protest among young people was "Fan Fest" (Hay Fest), an annual musical festival resembling those in hippie times. As one of the organizers stated: "we meant from the very start to be not only a musical event, but to focus a lot on workshops and group gatherings where we could discuss and debate. And now I find it unbelievable that we managed, overnight, to put up posters in over 40 cities. We would send them by bus, by train…" (Roxana Pencea) https://www.scena9.ro/article/18-ani-de-salvat-rosia-montana. But later, Social Media brought an essential contribution to this movement. As I have stated on a different occasion (Stoiciu, 2019), virtual space can be a good incubator for spontaneous cybersolidarities to transform into ready to act in real life communities. A good perspective on this take

comes from Stephanie Roth, "Salvati Rosia Montana" supporter: "In the beginning we didn't have Facebook, or Twitter, or YouTube. Social networks immensely aided the shift in the campaign's dynamic and they came at the right time. One of the main problems was that the extraction mining company had so many media contracts, nobody wrote anymore about the "Salvati Rosia Montana" campaign. Social networks have lifted the ban. (https://www.scena9.ro/article/18-ani-de-salvat-rosia-montana).

In 2013, acting as an organization hub for some of the amplest protests of this movement was the Social Media Facebook page (https://www.facebook.com/ SalvatiRosiaMontana/), which remains active even now because the Romanian government only suspended the contracts with the private mining company, a definitive annulment still requiring political support. "Engaging people with climate change by using Social Media as a medium not only requires the understanding of how Social Media communication can drive engagement and behavior change, but also requires the understanding of the needs and situations of the users so that more targeted strategies can be selected to drive such change." (Fernandez et al., 2017: 13)

Charles Tilly defines social movements as a series of demonstrations and campaigns through which ordinary people address collective demands to those in charge. Tilly believes that social movements are characterized by three important elements: campaigns (addressing the claim), repertoire (petitions, demonstrations, pamphlets, etc.) and specific values (unity, commitment, etc.)

In 2015, another protest campaign, "Coruptia ucide" (Corruption kills), was backed using the same platform, Facebook, (https://www.facebook.com/coruptia.ucide/). The movement was triggered by the tragic fire that killed 64 people and injured 146 at Colectiv Club on the night of October 30th, 2015. Initial official investigations pointed out that the club's license was issued negligently or dishonestly. This led to a furious uprising where thousands of Bucharest citizens initiated ample protests on the following days. These protests of unprecedented amplitude and promptitude in post "University Square 1990" Romania generated such a social pressure on the political scene that it led to the resignation of the prime minister.

In February 2017, a part of the active textual members on the "Coruptia Ucide" platform initiated a new movement to protest the government's intent of decriminalizing some acts of corruption usually committed by serving politicians. The movement got the name #REZIST. The Facebook page associated with the protest group was active for almost two years.

4. Nicuşor Dan's candidacy for mayor - an exclusive product of Social Media

Political careers are relying their existence and evolution on popularity and favorability. In a democratic society, the vote holds the power to build or destroy the destiny of individuals or groups who strive to emerge as leaders. The sensitive relationship between politicians and the voters is nurtured by confidence and mutual respect. Press and audiovisual made possible for people without political pedigree to ascend to most important positions in State. Internet, with both its phases (web 1.0 and web 2.0),

offered new tribunes for political campaigns. Personal websites, blogs and Social Media pages are platforms where stories can be told and political biographies can be constructed (Barassi, 2018).

Perhaps the most prominent Romanian political career built with the help of Social Media is the one of Nicusor Dan, the mayor of Bucharest since 2020. Apolitical activist since early 2000, N. D. founds in 2006 the NGO "Uniunea Salvaţi Bucureştiul" (USB) - Save Bucharest Union. Its aim was to publicly defend historical buildings of Bucharest threatened to be demolished by real estate developers encouraged by a benevolent indifference of local admiration. USB engaged several judiciary battles with some success till 2015 when the NGO changed its status to political party and competed in June 2016 to local elections - Nicusor Dan being candidate for mayor office but eventually losing the elections. Being encouraged by a good result, USB transformed into USR - "Uniunea Salvaţi Romania" (Save Romania Union) and participated to legislative elections in December 2016 where it gained about 9%. As a result, Nicusor Dan became a member of Romanian Parliament. In 2017, Nicusor Dan decided to quit USR and become independent. He remained very active on civic agenda regarding the administration of Bucharest and received the support of National Liberal Party for his independent candidacy to 2020 mayor office elections, which he eventually won, thus becoming Bucharest's mayor in office.

Figure 5. 2016 Bucharest local elections - Campaign Ad for Nicusor Dan

This particular example of cultivating the political potential of an independent activist and his agenda reveals how important it is to "develop a complex personal narrative that is simultaneously shaped by processes of identification and distancing to political groups, as well as by processes of meaning construction of their own biographical experiences" (Barassi, 2018: 148).

5. Challenging Electoral Campaigns Through Social Media

An important electoral upset caused by a public turmoil ignited from intense Social Media campaign was the second tour of 2014 Presidential elections. The front-runner, Victor Ponta, who, at the time, was Romania's Prime Minister, was accused by representatives of Romanian diaspora of not allowing the organization of enough polling stations in Western European and North American cities. The accusations were rejected by the politician. Amplified through mainstream media and Internet platforms, this collective indignation snow-balled into a mobilization of indigenous relatives of Romanian emigrants in support to the second tour for Klaus Iohannis, the competitor of Victor Ponta who, as a result, lost this political battle.

Another interesting case is the overnight ascension of AUR party. Established 6 months before 2020's spring worldwide lock-downs caused by COVID-19 pandemic, Alliance for Unity of Romanians (AUR) party rode the wave of discontent and distrust against Romanian authorities. The emergency coping sanitary policies and restriction measures very poorly communicated by the Government have gradually induced a reaction of rejection from an important part of the population. Unlawful public acquisition of masks and other medical supplies made the most debated news among Romanians living inside or abroad. AUR party managed to absorb an important chunk of this public agenda and took 9 % on 2020 legislative elections.

6. Pandemic Social Campaign in Romania

To say that COVID-19 caught a whole world by surprise would be a clear understatement. Even the most advanced societies couldn't figure out the optimal way to react against the 'little bug' that spread rapidly worldwide due to fast long-distance transportation. The state of mind that amplified the impact of pandemic in 2020 was a general confusion on how to individually react to the discovery of a positive COVID-19 diagnosis at a close one. Rumors and misinformation expanded by the social media's lack of qualified critical analysis amplified the confusion and panic. Many people hesitated between acknowledging their symptoms and lying themselves and others. A plethora of absurd self-treatments populated the net and, evidently, conspiracy theories ensued and flourished.

Romanian virtual communities were not spared by these informational abominations. On the contrary, the mask and lock-down became almost instantly symbols of tyrannical tendencies of the globalist elites. Therefore, it recorded an enormous number of 'unforeseen' deaths (especially among unproblematic young people) due to postponement of medical consultation and reckless behavior of vulnerable individuals while frequenting public spaces. Both the content and the dissemination of public warnings made by the national authorities manifested a gross incoherence and incompetence.

In opposition with 2020's amateurish discourse and strategy of preventative measures against COVID spread, one year later, the public campaign concerning vaccination was

conducted with impeccable communication skills. For the first time the national authorities prioritized the Social Media platforms over the audiovisual. RO-Vaccinare online platform and Facebook page gained rapidly a large number of followers and became very popular through prolific and surprisingly creative advertisement (https://www.facebook.com/ROVaccinare/posts/140070688006682/). However, it cannot be ignored that a very substantial amount of money was allocated to this campaign from the national and European Union budget, making possible the involvement of top advertisement professionals.

Unfortunately, this campaign was not accompanied with the same organizational level. Residents from rural and small-town areas had a scarce access to vaccines- a fact that made Romania a dunce regarding the vaccination rate among European countries

Figure 6. Ad for COVID-19 Vaccination Campaign

Source: ROVaccinare Facebook page, accessed 07.09.2022

Conclusion

During late 1990's, sharing ideas through online forums and exchanging messages on MIRC or chat websites was a tremendous opportunity for people around the globe to interact and socialize. However, at the eve of 21st century, the implementation of messenger applications (textual initially, then audiovisual) and Hi5 or Myspace arrival, 'social networking services' made Internet the most powerful invention ever created by human beings. A crucial life-altering event occurs the first time someone sees his/her thoughts and work "shared by someone else on Facebook, retweeted, or in some other way extended to friends of friends, acquaintances, and, most importantly of all, to people you would otherwise not have encountered" (Signorelli, 2021: 5)

An unmanageable yet obstacle with online campaigning is the difficulty of disseminating the content to those who are not already associated somehow with the

inner circle of the authors. In this case a hybrid approach seems more appropriate as face-to-face contact makes the case for more trustful relationships.

Internet represents nowadays the single most important medium through which young people conceive and support civic engagement be that: online petition, Social Media dedicated page or a communication nexus starting point for in situ public protest movement. At the same time, cyberspace has often been a shelter for various groups menaced by political oppression or just by public shaming. Religious, ethnic, or sexual minorities have found on the web a realm of relief but also a battle camp. Social Media can offer an inexpensive and effective method of disseminating information (Banaji and Buckingham, 2013) and of contacting other individuals interested in taking part to civic engagement actions which can be in a variety of ways that do not always adhere to traditional perceptions of parliamentarian politics (Uldam and Vestergaard, 2015). The most powerful examples are: Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street movement, Indignados, and more recently Gilets Jaunes.

Therefore, Social Media can prove to be the optimal instrument at our disposition in present times able to help us engage social actions and nurture communities of interest united by the aspiration of trying to change the world. Nevertheless, in times of great concerns, Social Media can prove to be as much damaging as it is useful.

Acknowledgements

Funding

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declares no conflicting interests.

References

Banaji, S., & Buckingham, D. (2013). *The Civic Web: Young People, the Internet, and Civic Participation*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Barassi, V. (2018). Social media activism, self-representation and the construction of political biographies. In Graham Meikle (Ed.): *The Routledge companion to media and activism* (pp. 142-150). Routledge.

Chovanec, J., & Dynel, M. (2015, eds.). *Participation in Public and Social Media Interactions*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins B.V.

Escobar, A., Hess, D., Licha, I., Sibley, W., Strathern, M., & Sutz, J. (1994). Welcome to Cyberia: Notes on the Anthropology of Cyberculture [and comments and reply]. *Current Anthropology*, 35(3), 211-231.

Fernandez, M., Piccolo, L. S., Maynard, D., Wippoo, M., Meili, C., & Alani, H. (2017). Pro-environmental campaigns via social media: analysing awareness and behaviour patterns. *Journal of Web Science*, 3(1). Avilable at: https://webscience-journal.net/webscience/index

Hogan, M. A. (n.d.) John Quincy Adams: Campaigns and elections. Available at: https://millercenter.org/president/jqadams/campaigns-and-elections (accessed on 29.09.2022)

Loader, B. D., & Mercea, D. (2011). Networking democracy? Social media innovations and participatory politics. *Information, Communication & Society*, 14(6), 757-769.

Miller, D. (2011). *Tales from Facebook*. Cambridge: Polity.

Myers West, S. (2022). Social Media as Social Infrastructures. In: Rosen, D. (ed.) *The Social Media Debate*. New York and London: Routledge

Pezzullo, P., & Cox, R (2006). *Environmental Communication and the Public Sphere*. Los Angeles: SAGE

Putnam, R. (2000). *Bowling Alone*. New York: Simon&Schuster

Rheingold, Howard. (1993). The Virtual Community. https://www.rheingold.com/vc/book/

Segeberg, A. (2017). *Online and Social Media Campaigns for Climate Change Engagement*. Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Climate Science, Oxford University Press.

Signorelli, P. (2021). *Change the World Using Social Media*. London: Rowman & Littlefield.

Stoiciu, G. (2019). Social Media as a Community Incubator. *Journal of Community Positive Practices*, XIX (4), 3-10.

Tilly, C. (2004). *Social Movements, 1768–2004*. Boulder: Paradigm Publishers.

Uldam, J., & Vestergaard, A. (2015, eds.). *Civic Engagement and Social Media. Political Participation Beyond Protest*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.