

THE IMPACT OF NEW MEDIA ON IOHANNIS' PRESIDENTIAL VICTORY

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Abstract: 2014 marked Romania's first new media presidential campaign, resulting in the unexpected victory of the candidate who had previously been presented by polls and media as the runner-up. Through the same electoral event, we could observe, for the first time, a presidential result favoured by the "citizen-camera witnessing" phenomenon, generated by the Facebook civic engagement of the Romanian voters from abroad. In the present paper, we aim to weigh the impact of the campaign which was carried out on Facebook on the runoff voting days, on the election results. By using the content analysis method, we are going to assess the voting dealignment generated by the first web 2.0 presidential campaign in Romania.

Keywords: new media, campaign, president, Facebook, citizen journalism.

1. Introduction

The presidential campaign carried out between candidates Victor Ponta and Klaus Iohannis can be considered the first new media political campaign, as it was the first political instance in which new media was used as a campaign tool in a strategic effort.

Due to his online communication strategy, Klaus Iohannis was labelled by the media as "the Facebook president". His victory was clearly the result of what happened on the social media platform known as Facebook during the two weeks after the first voting round. Not only did his staff make use of a proper context given by the Diaspora unfortunate polling station situation, but the Facebook audience highly contributed to this victory by generating a voting dealignment, turning the runner-up into the winner of the electoral race. Iohannis is one of the most visible politicians in social media, as he is the only European politician with over 1,5 million *likes* on Facebook (Reportervirtual 2014).

Moreover, it is probably the first time that civic engagement achieves such results in Romania, due to the *citizen camera-witnessing* phenomenon. Protests following the Diaspora incidents manage to create high international visibility, turning over the expected results of the presidential campaign.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. New media in politics

New media appears to be one of the most common tools for advertising. We assume that new media is a cheap, very easy and very popular tool, that engages more and more people, creating a strong network between cultures and areas of interest. "Consumers use new media to contribute to all parts of the value chain,

ranging from superficial articulation to extensive co-creation" (Henning-Thurau 2010). The affirmation can be extended to a political level as well, as the electorate can contribute by adding valuable information on the social media that can be taken into consideration by other groups.

As stated before, the traditional media is being replaced, nowadays, by the new media. With the emergence and spread of new media in today's civic life, we are witnessing a move of audience activities online (Jingsi Wu 2013). This trend is becoming popular all around the world and new media is being used in many domains.

President Obama and his team used new media for embracing young voters, resulted in fundamental changes in the American political landscape (Alexandrova 2010). Not only the American political spectrum was changed, but also the international political campaigning strategies were reconsidered. One of the most accurate comparisons presented Obama as the teenagers' favourite candidate. *"The clash between Apple and Microsoft. Obama was the Mac, of course: youthful, creative, nimble, forward-looking, and sleekly stylish; Clinton was the PC - massive, corporate, sitting atop a huge pile of capital. John McCain, though, was an IBM Selectric."* (Friedman 2009) According to this, we can conclude the fact that new media is more user friendly for the teenagers, as they respond better to this form of political advertising. *"Virtual communication for such people is extremely important; therefore, social media enables the politicians to reach youth through the most acceptable communication channel."* (Suminas 2012) All in all, this gap between generations must be seen by political actors in terms of adaptation. *"To some extent, the threat to older media is a cultural-generational one. As McLuhan noted, new media can change profoundly the way in which content is consumed and perceived."* (Lehman-Wilzing and Cohen-Avigdor 2004)

What's more important, new media offers the possibility of a two-way communication between the politicians and members of the society when politicians can have direct reversible connection and citizens can freely create and transmit any type of messages to the politicians. (Suminas 2012) Moreover, it is much easier to have different approaches to different kind of publics, by using social media. *"In today's world the audience of electors becomes more and more fragmentary and different parts of it demand personal communicative messages that satisfy their interests and new forms of information presentation that are specialized for every individual user"* (Suminas 2012). This can result in many benefits, for both political actors and the electorate.

New media counts not only as a form of transmitting information, but as a form of creating content. *"Consumers use new media to participate in social networks, which enable them to create and share content, communicate with one another, and build relationships with other consumers"* (Henning-Thurau 2010).

2.2. Citizen camera-witnessing

In the midst of the uprising trend of using new technologies, reporting events can be thought as one of the areas in which we witness some of the most significant changes. Journalism has been affected by these new technologies especially when one thinks about *citizen journalism*, as citizen-made pictures and videos are now "a

routine feature of mainstream news coverage" (Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti 2013b, 1). The impact of sharing experiences through amateur pictures and videos has been carried onto the organizations in charge of reporting news, enhancing the visibility and coverage of events – especially crises events – on an international level.

Recent events, such as the 2013 – 2014 uprising of the Ukrainian citizens against the Yanukovich regime – known as *EuroMaidan* –, have contributed to the ascension of Facebook, as a social media platform used in order to convert the global community into a witness to the Ukrainian revolution through photos and video streaming. What is more, Facebook was used by the citizens on EuroMaidan as a means of generating debate and gathering support for a new government.

In defining the *citizen camera-witness*, Andén-Papadopoulos (2013a) envisions individuals, average citizens or political activists "*who put their lives at risk to produce incontrovertible public testimony to unjust and disastrous developments around the world, in a critical bid to mobilize global solidarity through the affective power of the visual*". This is, of course, the case of high-risk political events, yet there are others which did not present such risks, but did create international awareness and solidarity. The concept of citizen camera-witnessing, as an expression of engagement created through a mobile phone device and then delivered over social media platforms, is a form of "*mass self-publication*" (Andén-Papadopoulos 2013a), conveying a negative personal experience – of political nature – in order to reach a wide audience.

Thus, the mobile camera phone becomes a portable extension of the self, as it documents the experience of its owner, either as the subject, or the witness to a political crisis event. Moreover, the device gives its owner some sort of networking power, as it generates an impact on the social media platform delivering the message to the public and might facilitate contact with other people undergoing the same or similar experiences or with the journalists in charge of reporting the events. However, the device providing amateur witness materials might have the power to bypass certain established editorial and censorial filters, as it shows situations as they are documented on the spot. Last but not least, the experience becomes a public record, a "*testimony that might disrupt «official» perspectives carefully crafted and provided to the mainstream news media*" (Andén-Papadopoulos 2013a).

2.3. Citizen camera-witnessing during the presidential elections in Romania

An in-house crisis which rooted in the diaspora voting process became an international crisis event, placing Romania on the map of citizen political journalism. The situation arose on the first round of the presidential elections, held on November 2nd, 2014, when what was considered to be a monotonous, bland political campaign generated a social movement both in the country and abroad. The voting process was dramatically slowed down by the requirement to fill in – before the members of the polling station's electoral bureau – a statutory declaration by which every citizen voting in another polling station that the one of residence commits not to vote in another polling station. Thus, many Romanian citizens from abroad did not manage to cast their votes.

Among the issues leading to protests, documented by the Romanian citizens from abroad and posted on Facebook through pictures and videos accompanied by

testimonials, there were the faulty organization – by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs – of the voting process from abroad, polling stations closing earlier than the already established closing time, peace officers using tear gas on citizens expressing their discontent towards the fact that they did not manage to cast a vote after spending hours in front of the polling stations. All these issues circulated on Facebook, engaging Romanians from all over the world in protests, in the two following weeks.

The situation did not improve by the time of the second voting round, which resulted in a vote dealignment phenomenon: parts of the partisan electorate turned into independent electorate, heavily impacting on the final vote results.

3. Methodology

Taking into consideration the impact of new media in the Romanian presidential campaign in 2014, we consider the content analysis the most suitable research method for this study. Therefore, we are going to analyse the two weeks of “social tension”, in between the two voting rounds. The period of time to be analysed is 3.11.2014 to 16.11.2014. According to the national televisions, this period was a much tensioned one and the political activity on social media was on a high pitch note. The contagion effect was one of the consequences of this tensioned period. In order to see the impact of this phenomenon, we came with an analysis grid, that tries to emphasize the great effect new media has nowadays. The content analysis is meant to outline the main characteristics of video materials, pictures, documents, articles, etc. Thus, in our case, the analysis focuses on Facebook posts, comments, likes, shares, videos and pictures attached to a post. Taking all this into consideration, we are going to see the effect of social media in the Romanian political campaigns and their importance in winning or losing the elections.

Item	Post
Number of likes	
Number of shares	
Trend of the comments	
Pictures	
Videos	
Trend of the post	
Key words	

Figure 1. Analysis grid

3.1. The Facebook president – an analysis

After the first voting round, the problems with Romanian Diaspora aroused. This was the begging of a series of protests and intense debates. As the Romanians that live outside the country were not able to vote because of the poor management of the organizing team, the fury of the people emerged, transforming Romania in a protest zone that was to be called a conflict between generations (Mediafax 2014), as the youngsters were those who supported Iohannis and the elders were going to vote for

Ponta. As Ponta and his team were in charge of organizing the elections, everybody considered this to be an attempt of defraud of the elections or preventing the Diaspora from voting.

The first Facebook post of Iohannis' team, after the first day of voting was a video of the situation of the Romanian Diaspora, who was not able to vote. The post gathered 22600 likes, 9829 shares and the trend of the post was positive for Iohannis, but against his main opponent, Victor Ponta. The most popular comment was "Iohannis for president" and the key words were: "no Ponta", "youngsters", "bustard", and "manipulation". This post had many comments, as the situation outside the borders seemed to be critical.

The next day, Iohannis' team didn't post a thing; they just updated the cover photo of the candidate's page. This photo was an electoral poster that presented Iohannis as the candidate of the right wing. This post gathered 17327 like and 739 shares. Once again, the most popular comment was "Iohannis for president". Not to mention the fact that the trend of the comments was positive for Iohannis and of course, negative for Ponta. The key words and phrases were "our president", "go to vote", "good luck", "God helps us", "I vote for Iohannis", "Diaspora has faith in you". Moreover, the people commenting on Iohannis' posts are usually people that support the right wing, hate Ponta and are furious because of the situation in the Diaspora.

On November 5th, there was no post from the campaign staff. The next day, on November 6th, the staff posted a video of Iohannis that would encourage the population to go vote on the next voting round. The video has a length of 1:56 minutes and it gathered 68775 like and 88698 shares. The video emphasizes the position of the right wing toward the scandal regarding the voting situation in the Diaspora. Iohannis presents himself as a "hero", "a saviour" of the Romanians. He encourages people to fight for their voting rights and to put pressure on the Government and Victor Ponta to solve the problem with the voting situation outside the country. Furthermore, he transmits his campaign message that suggests that "people are stronger together", that is why they all have to unit their forces, in order to win the electoral competition. On a more realistic note, we have to appreciate the trend of the post as being positive for the actual president and against his opponent, the current prime-minister, Victor Ponta. The social media fans of Iohannis posted comments declared their support for the candidate and most of them approved his message. They posted comments against Ponta and the top comment was posted by a Romanian lady who lived in UK and declared that she will travel for 3 and a half hours to the polling station. Also, she expressed her wish that on the 16th of November we will all celebrate his victory. This video was a very popular post for Iohannis and it engaged lots of users that commented, shared and likes the post. Moreover, they started real debated related to the post and expressed their true wish of having the candidate as the next Romanian president.

On the 7th of November the candidate had 5 posts. The first would be news about independent observers for the elections, an original article from romaniacurata.ro. The Central Electoral Bureau, the Romanian institution in charge with the election was not approving the new observers for the second voting round and Iohannis would blame it on the Government and the prime-minister Victor Ponta. The post had 6516 likes, 888 shares and comments that approve Iohannis's position. The key word were "thieves",

“not everybody is like u”, “our generation represents the change”. The most relevant comment was posted by a woman that would say that Iohannis is the first man in the post-revolutionary Romanian history that does not want the parliamentary immunity. The second post from the 7th of November presents a campaign video where Iohannis presents himself as the prosper mayor of Sibiu and a prosper president to be. It gathered 40964 likes, 10999 shares. The main phrases: “the internet is with you”, “no communism”, etc. Again, the main comment was posted by a woman, a resident of Sibiu that declared that things in Sibiu are still working very well that is why she’s going to vote for Iohannis. The fans of the page are even using emoticons, in order to express their support and gratitude for Iohannis’ electoral program. During this analysis we were able to identify some hearts, smiley faces and all sorts of emoticons that reveal the support and the fanaticism of the electorate.

Another video posted on the same day, reveals the negative campaign instruments used by the campaign staff. In this video, Iohannis talks about the communist era making a comparison between the actual Government and the communist one. He underlines the poor living conditions and the fake promises of the current Government. The video has almost 1 minute and a half and a number of 17929 likes and 3516 shares. The trend stays the same and the main phrases are “revolution”, “Iohannis for president”, “Rome votes for Iohannis”. The top comment was posted by a woman that would express her sympathy for Iohannis and declared that Spain supports him.

The 4th post of that day was a 1:17 minutes video. The video presented Iohannis in a televised talk show where he explained the position of his party and his approval for the western and American democracies, while Ponta would appreciate the Communist Chinese Party. He gathered a total of 21592 likes, 5766 shares and would keep a positive trend of the comments. These comments would talk about Ponta who is a corrupt politician and Iohannis popularity on Facebook, while Ponta’s popularity is decreasing. The top comment presented the number of likes from the two Facebook pages and the fan who posted declared that Iohannis’ popularity is “up to the sky”.

The last post from the 7th of November presented a series of photos from a visit Iohannis did in the counties of Braila and Galati. It gathered 16610 likes, 652 shares and a positive trend of the comments. Some of the key words were: “Iohannis for president” (and again the top comment), “Paris is with you”, etc.

On the 8th of November the campaign staff posted twice. A video (1:46 minutes) of Iohannis expressing his gratitude for those voting for him, for the youngsters and those fighting for their liberty gathered a number of 30091 likes, 17363 shares. The comments tend to encourage Iohannis or the second voting round as the key words were: “this is the president we need”, “Vote Klaus Iohannis”, etc. The top comment was the campaign motto, posted by a fan.

The next post was actually an update of the cover photo, with the motto “we are invincible together”. It gathered 22602 likes, 1854 shares and the top comment was talking about the protests in the main cities of Romania that protest against the main party, PSD. The trend of the comments was positive and some of the key words were: “democracy”, “justice”, “we want our country back”. The next day, the 9th of November there were no posts on Iohannis’ Facebook page.

The week preceding the second voting round does not show intense activity on the side of Iohannis’ campaign staff, with only 9 posts before the voting day and 6 other

posts on November 16th, the day of the second voting round. Mostly, the posts on Iohannis' official Facebook page consist in cover photos, profile pictures and videos. In a nutshell, the liberal candidate's social media staff posted – during this second week – 9 cover photos, 3 videos, a profile picture and an album of pictures from the diaspora. Some important aspects that need to be mentioned are the fact that the current president – or his staff – does not interact with the audience, he does not react to comments. Moreover, there are no texts accompanying the cover photos or the profile photos posted by the social media team, which most likely means that the staff relies on the high visual impact of photos. Also, every now and then in the flow of the comments to every post, there are users – Romanians from abroad – posting messages of support and expressing their intent to vote from different parts of the world.

The debut post of the week before the second voting round opens the gallery of cover photos marking the countdown to the voting day, all stating "We have x days left to heal Romania!" („*Mai avem x zile să facem România bine!*"). Thus, the first cover photo posted on the page states "We have 7 days left to heal Romania!" obtained 16,751 likes and 1,087 shares, most of the comments showing either support for the candidate or lack of support for his opponent. The top comment for this post gathered 866 likes and 27 further comments – pro and against debate on Iohannis' qualities – and is clearly formulated against Victor Ponta, presenting Iohannis as a heroic character, the symbol of real change. The next most favoured comment to this post states "Klaus Iohannis for President" and sums 378 likes. The trend of the post is a positive one, suggesting hope for the Romanian people, and the trend of the comments is a positive one as well, as most show confidence in the candidate and others show an attitude unfavourable to the opponent.

The second post, from November 11th, continues the countdown series with a cover photo that gathers less likes and shares than the previous one, and the top comment represents a supporter's declaration of vote for Iohannis – obtaining 680 likes and 42 replies. The following post, from the same day, appears to be highly favoured by the public, with 20,996 likes and 6,726 shares. The video posted represents a message against Iohannis' opponent, denouncing death threats during the campaign. Some key words from the candidate's message are *Ponta*, *campaign* and *president* and they reveal the negative trend of the post, directed against Victor Ponta. Moreover, the top comment to this post is a positive one, a cue-to-action for voting in favour of Iohannis – which gathered 1,588 likes and 47 replies –, yet the next top comment is a negative one, against the opposing political party, liked by 748 people. Most of the comments show support for the candidate; however, a significant part of them focus on undermining his opponent.

The series of countdown cover photos continues next day with a photo recording 17,966 likes and 820 shares, but this time the top comments reach 945, respectively 871 likes, and around two or three dozen replies each. The first comment represents a statement of support for Iohannis from the youth and the second one is an argument in favour of his performance during the TV debate. Most of the comments show a positive trend, and some key words supporting the candidate's performance could be *normality*, *stateliness*, *common sense* and *dignity*. Moreover, there can be identified key words regarding Ponta's performance during the debate, like *aggressiveness*. The next day

brings a change of the profile photo, stating “Klaus Iohannis for President” and gathering over 67,000 likes and almost 7,000 shares. The trend of the comments is positive and shows support of the youth and faith in the candidate’s qualities, just like the post from the following day, a new countdown cover photo.

The next video message is posted two days before the second voting round, and it shows Klaus Iohannis singing the national anthem, as a reaction to Ponta’s slip-up. The video records over 46,000 likes and over 16,000 shares and the message has a positive trend, with key words like *Romania* and *together*, and the two top comments have a positive trend; the first top comment is an anti-Ponta message, suggesting the audience to hide the identity card of relatives who want to vote for Ponta – 5536 likes – , while the next one is laid down in a positive manner, congratulating Iohannis on his initiative – 3105 likes and 81 replies. *Courage*, *confidence* and *congratulations* are some of the key words identified among the comments. On the same day, the staff posts the next cover photo, gathering over 20,000 likes and 1,000 shares. Just like the previous posts, the comments suggest confidence and support for the candidate and lack of support for the opponent. The following post – a new cover photo – is slightly more popular than the latter.

The second voting round day, November 16th, brings along 6 Facebook posts, starting with an amateur citizen-made video of a polling station from the diaspora, accompanied by a message directed to Romanian citizens from abroad and denouncing the faulty organization of the voting process from the second round. The key words – *diaspora*, *vote*, *rights* – helped gather 43,417 likes and close to 8,000 shares, yet the message has a positive trend with a negative underlying tone, as it encourages citizens to cast their vote, while subtly blaming the Executive for the faulty organization of the election process. The top comment – with 1,748 likes and 48 replies – foresees a revolution in case Romanians from the diaspora are not allowed to vote, which later turned out to overturn the estimated results, giving an expected winner. The next post is a cover photo marking the election day, which recorded over 52,000 likes and 3,300 shares, along with positive comments from Romanians around the world announcing that they are either off to the polling station or that they have already cast their vote for Iohannis. The most favoured comment says “Iohannis for President” and gathers 2,934 likes and 38 replies.

Moreover, the candidate’s staff posts an album of citizen-made pictures from the diaspora, with the queues from the polling stations, and the message “Romanians from everywhere, I am by your side!”. Thus, Iohannis makes electoral capital out of the citizen-camera witnessing phenomenon, earning 130,445 likes and 8,699 shares. On a positive trend, the post attracts positive comments, topped by an anti-Ponta amateur-made poem, with 3,586 likes. The last two posts are both cover photos, the first one stating “You made history! For the first time, the online made the difference!” – with 132,372 likes and 9,524 shares – and the second one confirming the victory: “We won! We took back our country!” – with 218,039 likes and 41,802 shares. Both posts share a positive trend, yet the top comments reveal both a negative attitude towards his opponent and a positive one towards Iohannis. The active audience applauds the victory – especially considered a victory of the Romanian diaspora –, while the key words trade on Victor Ponta’s campaign slogan: *united*, *against*, *Ponta*.

After undertaking this analysis, we can conclude that most of the comments were against the main opponent Victor Ponta. The majority of the fans were youngsters that considered PSD and Victor Ponta to be the “coming back of the communism”. The majority of the comments on Iohannis’ posts were written by women, who seem to be more active in the online environment.

4. Conclusions

To sum up, the article focuses on the impact of new media in the 2014 Romanian presidential campaign. The aim of the study was to emphasize the power of new media and its tools, in changing the peoples’ vision on politics. Facebook, the main instrument for communication for the current Romanian president, Klaus Iohannis, marked the turning point in the civic Romanian life, for a period of two weeks. Having the citizen-camera witnessing as a theoretical framework, we undertook an analysis of Iohannis’ Facebook page that concluded in a great number of likes, shares and comments, most of them in favor of the candidate and against his opponent. Yet the number of posts was pretty small, the anger and the rage regarding the events in the Diaspora, engaged the citizens in a civic movement that started online and developed through media. After analyzing the trend of the comments, we can conclude that the electorate was determined to vote for Iohannis, protesting against the current prime-minister. Even if he appeared to be the “savior” of the Romanian people, the electorate was not into voting his political agenda.

As for the online strategy, we cannot identify a clear agenda. Iohannis and his staff focused their attention on the situation regarding the Diaspora and saw the upcoming of this situation, so they used it in their favor. All in all, none of the two candidates had a well-defined strategy; therefore, we can state that this electoral campaign was based on an anti-system vote. In the end, we can conclude that Iohannis’ victory is due mostly to the vote dealignment, the citizen-camera witnessing phenomenon and the gap between generations.

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