COMMUNICATION THROUGH SOCIAL NETWORKS AMONG HEADS OF GOVERNMENT OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

Ionuţ Suciu
Assoc. Prof., PhD, West University of Timişoara

Abstract: There are some key moments in the history of the link between politics and the online environment. Howard Dean is considered to be the pioneer of using the internet in election campaigns after he opted, in 2004, to raise funds and mobilize volunteers for US Democrats using the online environment. Four years later, Barack Obama was elected as the 44th US president after an online campaign coordinated by one of the founding members of Facebook. In Europe, social networks have gained similar momentum, becoming the main channels of direct communication of politicians and senior state officials with citizens. At the level of the European Union, all Heads of Government of the member states take advantage of the tools offered by social networks in order to make their activity known, to promote themselves or to communicate with the citizens. The exception is represented by the Romanian Prime Minister, who does not have an official Facebook page and her Twitter account has not been updated since 2015. The present study aims to analyze the activity of the Heads of Government of the biggest ten countries of the European Union (outside Romania) on their official social networking accounts where they have the most intense activity (Facebook or Twitter). The research tracked the number of watchers, the frequency and type of posts, the usage of the multimedia tools, the language used in the posts, and the quality in which the senior officials posted (as a public person or in personal name).

Keywords: journalism, European Union, social networks, communication, Facebook

Introduction:

Politics and the online environment have begun to shake hands since 2004, when Howard Dean decided to use the internet in the United States election campaign. His party lost, but the method used had a long-term gain, because the online environment has since begun to be used on a wider scale. In 2008, Barack Obama, newly elected as the 44th US president, spoke publicly about the importance of mobilizing young people. Those young people who were visiting websites and social networks where Obama had begun to become more and more present. Obama's online campaign was coordinated by Chris Hughes, one of the founding members of Facebook, who not only created a professional profile for him on the social network, but also built an official website that imitated the structure of the network. Obama was the first politician to use the Internet in order to organize his supporters, advertise and communicate with individuals in a way that was not possible in previous elections. Obama used sites like YouTube to advertise, and videos he posted here were viewed for 14.5 million hours. "The Internet and an extraordinary social movement enabled him to come to power and youth were the engine of his victory" (Harfoush, p.VIII).

The success achieved in the United States has made social networks more widely used in the European political and administrative environment too. Communication specialists have come to the conclusion that "regardless of a politician's party affiliation or previous history, social media simplifies the word of mouth and facilitates collaboration" (McConnell, Huba 2007, p. 23), an idea later explored by Clay Shirky: "Facebook and Twitter offer a new outlet to mobilize groups to action and unlike most media, "the receiver cares about the sender" enough to seek out additional information" (Shirky, 2008, 184).

The impact of social media has increased with the development of technologies that have facilitated access and usability. Stanley Baran and Dennis Davis explain the theory of media systems dependence: "the more a person depends on the use of social media, the more important will be the social media role in her life" (Baran & Davis, 2014, p. 127). Strategists dealing with the image of top dignitaries have realized that, as emphasized by Zbucea, Pînzaru and Galalae, the specific objectives of a promotional campaign are not necessarily always of a direct commercial nature. "The effects are visible in the long run and are manifested both at the public level and at the level of the overall market" (Zbuchea, Pînzaru, Galalae, p.26).

Ministers in the European Union and social media trends.

This paper aims to analyze the use of social networks by ministers of the countries in the European Union, focusing on the construction of the pages, the type of posts, as well as on the adaptation to the development of the technology and the behavior of the users. The research has taken into account the pages of the ministers of the ten largest countries in the European Union (except for Romania). We followed their posts on the official Facebook or Twitter pages for 70 days between March and May 2018. More than 800 posts were analyzed, but also the general construction of official pages.

Unlike the Romanian Prime Minister, who closed her Facebook account once she was named into her new position, and has an inactive Twitter account, the ministers of the ten countries are using the opportunities offered by the social networks in order to make their projects known and for the benefits of image they can gain here. The analysis has led to common elements for most ministers, but also to innovations used only by some of them or by the teams that coordinate their activity on the social networks.

Angela Merkel is by far the most popular minister in the European Union states on social media. With more than 2.5 million followers on Facebook, the Chancellor of Germany surpasses even the next nine combined. That, despite the fact that her page is by no means the best-updated or best-constructed one. The team behind the page does not post regularly. In fact, the average is a three-day post, far from what theorists describe as an active account (Kawasaki, Fitzpatrick, 2015, p. 60). Merkel's team uses, instead, multimedia, whether it's video clips, or combinations of photos and text or infographics - all professionally done, carefully handed out to every detail - from framing up to the quality of the image. Every public intervention of the Chancellor is broadcasted live on her Facebook page. Merkel has only official posts in almost equal proportions as Chancellor of Germany or as a representative of her party, being the most important voice of it (Merkel has 15 times more followers on Facebook than her party).

At the other extreme in terms of the number of fans, there is the Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, who collects just over 4,000 evaluations of his page. The explanation may be that the Polish does not offer his own content of his account. All posts on the page are distributed from the official page of the Prime Minister's Chancellery. There are, on average, 2-3 daily posts distributed, especially video clips, as well as photos, text, or distribution from the Government website. In fact, the chancellery's page is very well maintained, with posts that include professional photo galleries, short videos and videos, filled in by infographs, live broadcasts from conferences and press releases. There are, however, some exceptions to Morawiecki's account. The only posts that were not shared from the other page are those with Easter wishes, one in which the prime-minister remembers the commemoration of 13 years since Pope John Paul II died, and another one announcing that he would offer a special pension to a young Polish. Even on the 8th of March, on International Women's Day, he shares the wishes from the chancellery page.

A special case is that of the Prime Minister of the Netherlands, Mark Rutte. He has been very active on Facebook in the election campaign for his country's municipal elections, with posts related to the party's work and platform, as well as popular photographies in order to try to get close to certain audiences, such as the one in which he appears at a DJ desk, with headphones on his ears. But once the electoral campaign ended, Rutte has stopped posting on his official Facebook page, so the last post is on March 21st. Instead, Rutte remained concerned with the maintenance of the official Twitter account, where he has nearly a million followers and where he has an average of two posts a day, accompanied by multimedia content. Similar is the case of Antonio Costa, Prime Minister of Portugal, who, despite having over 50,000 fans on Facebook, has not posted on the social networking network since 2016, when he started using Twitter, where he became very active and where has managed to raise a total of 68,000 followers. His activity here is even more intense than that of his counterpart in the Netherlands, with the lusitan having an average of 3-4 daily posts, also accompanied by a high proportion of multimedia content. From this point of view, on Facebook, among the accounts analyzed, the most active is that of the French Prime Minister Edouard Philippe, who has an average of three daily posts.

First impression

We can almost speak of a typology when it comes to the first impression a ministry tries to leave to the official page visitor. According to the Poynter Institute, the interest of people who visit a web page follows the letter "F" (Tompkins, 2008). Given this, the first things that attract the attention of a visitor to the Facebook or Twitter profile are the profile and cover photo. In the cases analyzed for this paper, all ministers appear in the profile photo alone, 80% of them are framed in closed shots and a similar percentage is represented by those who smile. Regardless of the hypostasis, the state it is trying to transmit, either by facial expression or by positioning the hands (where they appear), a positive, safety generator message. Framing differs in the case of cover photo, where most ministers are surprised in situations that reveal the proximity of the audience, communicating with people, shaking hands, being the their photos etc. 70% of them are in the middle of an action, surrounded by different people – from children (Theresa May - UK) and young people (Charles Michel - Belgium, Paolo Gentiloni - Italy), to people whose identity is neglected, in a photography where they are seated with their backs to the camera lens but with the face of the prime minister visible, trying to suggest the idea of popularity among the crowd (Mark Rutte - The Netherlands). In two cases, prime ministers use the photo of the building that houses the government as cover photo (António Costa - Portugal, Alexis Tsipras - Greece), while Angela Merkel also used the "cliché" with a close shot with her smile.

Although it is not on the front page, the "about" section is the one that should offer a broad description to the account holder. Less than half of the accounts studied use the complexity provided by this column. The Chancellor of Germany stands out here. Angela Merkel presents, besides official issues and her political career, also characteristics that bring her closer to people, such as favorite books, music and movies, hobbies, the quote that guides the career, but also the dream she has - one whose purpose is to "humanize" her: "a trip with the Trans-Siberian Railway from Moscow to Vladivostok". The Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel has a description in three languages, links to accounts on other social networks, but also to a phone number from his cabinet and his personal Facebook account. The page has a usage policy in four languages, which states that "Everyone is invited to participate, provided they respect some basic rules of courtesy." On the opposite side, the accounts of the prime ministers in England, Italy and the Netherlands have only basic references to their owners being heads of government in the mentioned countries.

120

The tendency to use video content

A study by BuzzSumo on over 100 million videos posted over the years 2016 and 2017 on Facebook shows that videos "have the most engagic Facebook format" (Rayson, 2017). Content producers around the world have adapted to social networking algorithms and act as such. This is also the case for the teams administering the accounts of ministers from the countries of the European Union. The video component predominates on their pages, where it appears in the most diverse forms. If on Angela Merkel's page all her interventions from the Bundestag are being broadcasted, Edouard Philippe's team takes full advantage of the opportunities offered by Facebook. On his page, videos are either live or in the form of pre-recorded moments, which are then merged with titles representing the most important information. Philippe has a weekly public live audience on his Facebook page, where he answers questions that the audience adresses to him using the comments section. Subsequently, the most interesting answers are posted separately in dynamic video montages in which images combine with written texts. Every public audience is promoted in advance, with teasers in the form of text or video, along with a call to action. The style used by Philippe's team is much like the one on television, and the feature can be noticed especially in the summaries of the high-dignitary work visits where dynamic montage is used, frames and relevant statements are chosen, and the resulting videos are approaching the mini-reporting format. A similar strategy calls Alexis Tsipras. On the Greek Premier's page, 80% of the posts are in video format and almost every public speech is broadcasted live. In addition, mini-reports are regularly posted on his page by his team. Videoclips have characters and events, having as an aim to put in a favorable light the important decisions taken by the government.

The Spanish Prime Minister has gone on and now has a videoblog, made in a professional way, with main titles, generic and packed in an attractive way. In addition, he periodically poses motivational clips, with himself in the main role, trying to send compatriots mobilization messages on different themes.

A feature of these clips is short duration, in order to be easy to navigate, as analyzes made in 2017 show that watch time on a social networking video is shrinking (Ahmed, 2017). The Belgian Prime Minister's team has gone so further that it only posts 20 seconds lenght videoclips with the basic ideas. The information is complemented by the text and, more importantly, by a link that refers to the full statement of the high-dignitary, loaded on the Government platform.

A special case is that of the Italian Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni. His page only contains video content. Basically, it's a collage of clips that contain his statements and press conferences. But his team does not make any selection in what it posts, so that the visitor is dealing with medium-time clips much higher than recommended. Most pass 10 minutes, making them hard to track. And to this sensation also contributes the poor text accompanying them, almost telegraphic: "This morning, in the province of Macerata", "The press conference with the President of the Republic of Romania, Klaus Werner Iohannis", "Press releases with the Prime Minister of Romania , Viorica Dăncilă "or" My intervention at the furniture store in Milan "(https://www.facebook.com/paologentiloni/). All of Gentiloni's videos are professionally filmed, but are his only public posts on the official Facebook page, as he does not post anything else, either in the form of written statements, or in the form of photographs or other display modes.

Other uses of visual aids

A study co-ordinated by Skyword and quoted by Kawasaki and Fitzpatrick shows that the number of views almost doubles "if a published article contains a relevant photo or infograph

121

compared to articles in the same category that did not have an image" (Kawasaki, Fitzpatrick, 2015 , p.54). The trend is also visible among the profiles studied, where both photo galleries and photos accompanying different texts are being used intensively (if there is no attached video already). Teams that coordinate activity on Facebook or Twitter pages pay great attention to the quality of the photos. With one exception, only the official photos of accredited photographers are published on the accounts of senior officials. The Belgium's Prime Minister, Charles Michel, whose approach on the public page is at the boundary between informal and formal, is the only one who also allows the use of images captured by amateur photographers, most likely with the phone. But his team also uses other visual elements, as every text contains emoticons selected to match the subject presented. Prime ministers in Spain and Greece are using customized .gifs, while almost all accounts have started using infographics and combinations of photos and graphics or text.

Writing style

With few exceptions, the predominant style of writing is a formal one. Theresa May reaches an almost cliché point when posting about meetings with senior dignitaries. All of those have similar opening formulas: "It was great to catch up with ..., Delighted to meet with ..., A real pleasure to sit down with ..., I was pleased to ..." (https://www.facebook.com/TheresaMayOfficial/). In most cases, there is a strategy in which it is noticeable that the purpose of the text is to complete the image (static or moving) that accompanies it, woithout being redundant. Most texts explain, without exhausting the idea. The exception is also the account of the Prime Minister of Italy, who, as we have seen above, uses telegraphic texts with a low informational content, built rather as explanations of the context in which filming was made.

In 90% of the cases studied, the content on the pages is original. Apart from the case of Poland, where we have already stated that the Prime Minister's strategy is to share the posts on the official account of the Prime Minister's chancellor's office, each staff comes its own content, both in terms of text and multimedia content. In less than 1% of cases, ministers distribute press articles on their page. Instead, some of the public profiles provide references to official government websites in the countries concerned; while ministers in Portugal and Belgium regularly use labels and hashtags in their posts. The latter's team, on the other hand, often uses formulations on boundries betwwen the formal and informal, from the desire to "humanize" and approach new audiences. In fact, Charles Michel has the Twitter and Instagram accounts linked to this Facebook page and two sections where one can track those posts, as they are integrated on the page. Is is an important issue, as he has more than 210,000 Twitter followers, who create a nearly five time bigger community than the one on Mark Zuckerberg's network.

An element of populism, encountered, with little exceptions, on all the researched profiles, is constituted by the wishes sent on various occasions through social networks. Easter, Labor Day or Women's Day are international holidays that have generated different ways of transmitting messages to the public. But the strategy was not a unitary one. In the case of Easter holidays, the overwhelming majority of the posts were made in the form of a text message accompanied by a photograph; on March 8th, this form was used in a halved percentage. Theresa May posted an article in the Guardian newspaper on domestic violence, while Edouard Philippe had a video on women's rights and gender equality in an attempt to draw attention to the two major issues.

Conclusions

With the upsurge of social networks, it has become inconceivable for officials in the governments of the European Union states not to use them in their communication strategy. With

the exception of Romania, all prime ministers from the U.E. take advantage of the tools offered by social networks to make their activity known, to promote themselves or to communicate with the citizens. For most, there are strategies specifically created by the communication teams behind them and adapted to the broadcasting environment and potential audiences. Strategists have learned that the image of a high-ranking dignitary is not only created in the traditional media, but social networking is equally important, given that tens or even hundreds of thousands of people have access to them.

Researching more than 800 posts on official Facebook or Twitter profiles highlights the impact of the video component. Communication strategists have learned to use images to convey messages, transforming ministry accounts into real multimedia platforms, which would have been hard to believe 15 years ago, for example. The transition was gradually made, like the road of traditional media, from simple texts to the photos, then to video, but if in mass-media the road was covered in hundreds of years, the development of technology allowed this route to be taken by the social media in a much faster pace.

It is expected that the number of innovations will increase in the coming period, and strategists in political communication will use them in their plans to promote senior officials. In the last period, it has been increasingly used the strategy of sponsored messages sent directly to the public through chat rooms, precisely in order to reach the consumer directly in the idea of creating the impression of a dialogue. It's just a matter of time until politicians will also send their messages directly via Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, Direct Message via Twitter or Linkedin. After all, it would be just an adaptation of their behavior to the development of technology, as the strategy of getting closer to the public with direct addressing is already practiced both on television, where politicians look directly into the camera when they have a direct message for voters (as if looking directly into people's eyes), and on public spaces, where there is a technology-free dialogue, used by politicians both offline and online, through the images they then post on social networks, as we have shown above, when analyzing cover photos of the profiles studied.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ahmed, T., *The State Of Facebook Video In The Year 2017: Video Length Up, Time Watched Down*, May 2nd, 2017. Retrieved from https://locowise.com/blog/the-state-of-facebook-video-in-the-year-2017-video-length-up-time-watched-down, accessed on April 14th, 2018;

Baran, S., Davis, D., 2014, *Mass Communication Theory: Foundations, Ferment, and Future*, Cengage Learning, Stanford;

Kawasaki, G., Fitzpatrick, P., 2015, *Arta rețelelor sociale,* București, Publika;

Harfoush, R., 2009, *Yes We Did! An inside look at how social media built the Obama brand*, Berkeley, New Riders;

McConnell, B., Huba, J., 2007, *Citizen Marketers: When People Are the Message*, IL: Kaplan Pub., Chicago;

Rayson, S., *Facebook Video Engagement: What We Learned From Analyzing 100 Million Videos*, August 23, 2017. Retrieved from http://buzzsumo.com/blog/facebook-video-engagement-learned-analyzing-100-million-videos#gs.ibRwp3Q, accessed on April 14th, 2018;

Shirky, C., 2008, *Here Comes Everybody: the Power of Organizing without Organizations*, Penguin, New York;

Tompkins, A., 2008, *When Online Mapping Gets Invasive*, April 7, 2008. Retrieved from https://www.poynter.org/news/when-online-mapping-gets-invasive, accessed on March 28th 2018;

Section: Communication, Journalism, Education Sciences, Psychology and Sociology

https://twitter.com/antoniocostapm
https://twitter.com/MinPres
https://www.facebook.com/alscosta/
https://www.facebook.com/AngelaMerkel/
https://www.facebook.com/CharlesMichel/
https://www.facebook.com/EdouardPhilippePM/
https://www.facebook.com/markrutte/
https://www.facebook.com/MateuszMorawieckiPremier/
https://www.facebook.com/search/top/?q=Mariano Rajoy%20
https://www.facebook.com/paologentiloni/
https://www.facebook.com/TheresaMayOfficial/
https://www.facebook.com/tsiprasalexis/
Zbuchea, A, Pînzaru, F., Galalae, G., 2009, *Ghid esenţial de promovare,* Tritonic, Bucureşi;

Section: Communication, Journalism, Education Sciences, Psychology and Sociology