

Reviews

Bloguri, facebook și politică (Blogs, Facebook and Politics)

by Dorina Guțu (ed.), Tudor Sălcudeanu, Paul Aparaschivei, Florența Toader

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The aim of this book is to analyse the new media and its impact on the electoral political communication. The three authors (Tudor Sălcudeanu, Paul Aparaschivei, Florența Toader) have studied the blog as a marketing means, used by politicians during the election campaigns in Romania and in the U.S.A. Interweaving the theoretical framework with the results of the empirical researches, the authors have provided “a diachronic journey” into the Romanian political blogosphere (2007-2009) and “an insightful journey” into the socializing network (Facebook), in order to better understand the role that the online environment played during Barack Obama’s election campaign.

The first article (“Dialogul surzilor în blogosfera politică românească”/ “The deaf people’s dialogue in the Romanian political blogosphere”) starts with a main issue in political science, namely the legitimacy of power, and it shows that political discourse may contribute to its accomplishment and consolidation. For the political leaders belonging to the Web 2.0 era (Guțu 2007: 19), the political blog is, on the one hand, a part of the legitimizing mechanism, a mobilizing and direct communication tool with the devoted voters, and on the other hand, a means of influencing the media agenda. Making a chronological presentation of the weblog (since 1997 up to nowadays), Tudor Sălcudeanu highlights both the advantages and the possible problems generated by: (1) the lack of credibility of the information

provided by bloggers, (2) the emotional-laden discourses, (3) the fragmentation of the public space according to ideological criteria.

Tudor Sălcudeanu's empirical research starts from three main questions: (a) do the Romanian political blogs establish connections only with those blogs which share the same ideology? (b) is there any polarizing tendency which will develop in time? (c) do the users of blog networks form a homogeneous group sharing the political ideologies of the respective bloggers? The author used 16 blogs as his empirical data, choosing them according to the following variables: the author's notoriety within the political life, the consistency of the articles during the period of time under study, the importance within the blogosphere and the clear-cut mentions for left or right ideology. In order to provide the polarization level, the author compared the total number of external links towards opposed ideological spheres with that of internal links sent towards one ideological sphere. The results of the research show the evolution of left or right-centered blogs along time intervals and highlight the dominance of the left ideology within the online environment, but, at the same time, they pinpoint a high degree of insularity within the Romanian blogosphere. Thus, it is obvious that the dialogue through blogs between the left and right representatives is scarce and that the intra and interideological communication bridges exist especially during important political moments. The blogger-politician tends to establish as many links as possible with his sympathizers' blogs and fewer with his party colleagues or ideological opponents. These virtual links between the politician and his sympathizers are facilitated by the set of common values shared by the two parties involved in communication, a fact highlighted by the author by shaping the social-democratic blog user's profile.

The conclusion of the first part is realistic in what the possibilities of the internet to democratize the political communication are concerned: "the Romanian political blogosphere cannot constitute an alternative public space. The fragmentation that is to be found on the national political stage is mainly reflected within the blogosphere." (our transl., p. 75) The political blog is not an information source for every Romanian interested citizen, but an opportunity to have a dialogue with preferred politicians. In Romania as well, the consolidation or the strengthening model seems to be a more efficient means of understanding the impact of using the internet in the political life than the model of mobilizing the non-aligned voters (Hooghe, Teepe 2007: 967).

In the second article (“Euroimaginea candidatului român online”/ “The Romanian Candidate’s Online Euroimage”), Paul Aparaschivei makes an analysis of the first election campaign where the Romanian politician used the blog as a communication tool, namely the 2007 campaign for the European Parliament. The author also makes a comparison between this campaign and the one in 2009. The aim of this article is to provide “an analysis of the primary image promoted through blogs by some Romanian politicians” (our transl., p. 79). The image analysis (Halic, Chiciudean 2007: 27) is used in order to establish the type of image promoted by the politicians during election campaigns, to highlight the imagological vulnerabilities and to propose some image corrections. There have been analysed the blogs belonging to the 2007 candidates (2 from the National Liberal Party and 2 from the Social Democratic Party) and to the 2009 candidates (2 from the SDP, 1 from the Democratic Liberal Party and 1 from the NLP). The image analysis was based on the following indicators: the function assumption, the political dimension, the human dimension and the professional dimension. Each item was subdivided into the following subindicators: for example, the function assumption one is subdivided into: proper fulfillment of the functional attributes, abuses, transparency, adequate leadership style, crisis management abilities.

The results show that the political and human dimensions are the main indicators emphasized by the Romanian politicians on their blog communication, the professional and the function assumption dimensions being scarcely mentioned. As a whole, the image has a positive character, the blog being understood as “a visiting card” which helps the politicians in the self-promotion process in a favorable manner, but also as a means of attack because no Romanian or European political project can be promoted without having this strategy of downplaying the opponents. Diving each indicator into several subindicators, the author succeeds in achieving (binary and cumulative) primary comparative profiles.

The Romanian politicians have understood that in order to be a part of the blogosphere there are necessary five arguments (Tudor 2008: 160-161), which might provide the blog holder notoriety, mediatization, correctness in the presentation of his points of view, message dissemination, and a solid image. Their way of achieving these advantages was quite different. Paul Aparaschivei makes a brief presentation of some well-known politicians’ blogs: Adrian Năstase, Ion Iliescu, Andrei Chiliman, Elena Udrea, Dan Voiculescu, Mircea Geoană, Crin Antonescu, Kelemen Hunor. This presentation is accomplished taking into account the following criteria: number of visitors, the decrease or increase of this number, the number of

posts, answers and comments, whether the traditional media used these blog posts as materials. It is interesting to mention the quantitative results: 350 blogs of Romanian politicians, the first five being: 132 blogs (PSD/ SDP), 90 blogs (PD-L/ LDP), 87 blogs (PNL/ LNP), 20 blogs (PNTCD/ CDNPP), 11 (PC/ CP) (p. 88).

As a conclusion, Paul Aparaschivei gives the following advice to the Romanian politician-bloggers: a sincere and permanent interaction with the readers, a quick feed-back to the comments, more information on the human and professional dimensions in order to show that they are close to the people and to convince them that they have the necessary competences in order to have a public function.

Florența Toader's article "Barack Obama – noua față a politicii americane/ Barack Obama – a New Face of American Politics" is an interesting and well-documented "journey" back in time, in 2008. The aim of the article is to find out the factors which brought the victory of the American democratic candidate. After the presentation of the characteristics of the American political life, the author provided an analysis of the online strategy used by Obama. Despite the great number of social networks (*Facebook, MySpace, You Tube, LinkedIn, Blak-Planet, MiGente, MyBatanga, AsianAve*) that B. Obama used, he also provided for his sympathizers his own social network (*MyBarackObama.com*). The candidate Obama succeeded in providing the internet users all the necessary information, the possibility of accessing them and of debating without any constraint. In one word, he succeeded in creating what was labelled as *Obamania*.

Starting from the analysis of the unofficial documents, the research focuses on two main hypotheses: (1) whether the great presence of young people to vote had a major contribution to the candidate Obama's victory; (2) whether the use of Facebook played a significant role to the informing and mobilizing of young people (p. 167).

In order to test the first hypothesis, the author starts from the demographic analysis of the state Illinois, the state where Obama was elected a senator in 2004. In order to accomplish the profile of the democratic voter there were used variables such as age, sex, race, ethnicity, marital status, urban/ rural community. The voter's political affiliation is the strongest factor which influences the vote. The analysis of the available data shows that the first hypothesis does not confirm: the young people from Illinois did not have a decisive influence upon Obama's victory, their number being too low in order to influence the result of the elections. But the mobilizing of the six million of young voters who turned into volunteers or opinion leaders represented the strong point of the democratic candidate.

Since 2004 the importance of the internet within the winning process for presidential elections has been acknowledged (Graf, Darr 2004: 12-26). Nowadays every candidate is aware of the significant role played by the mobilizing of voters through web sites, blogs and social networks. In order to test the second hypothesis, the author analyses some indicators (the Illinois inhabitants have/ do not have a Facebook account, the quantity and frequency of the information posted by the candidate, the issues addressed versus the young people's interests, the comments, the message tone, the communication strategies) and establishes some correspondences between Obama's political offer and the expectations of the voters present on the Facebook, which finally led to the confirmation of this hypothesis. The social networks attracted a huge number of sympathizers, collected a lot of information about them, reminded them of enrolling in the vote lists and of going to vote on the election day, turned the candidates into human beings and brought the voters within a virtual agora. The social networks informed and mobilized the young voter, thus having a decisive contribution to a bilateral, transparent political communication.

The three authors provide examples of a temperate optimism in what the use of new media in election campaigns and the acquiring of success are concerned. The online campaigns should be complementary to the offline traditional campaigns, send unitary messages which should meet the voters' expectations, humanize and bring the politicians closer to the citizens.

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