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Sumar

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Pics or It Didn't Happen***: Analyzing Facebook Photographs of Romanian Women Politicians

Abstract: In today's communication reality, social media gain greater importance in all types of marketing purposes. Following this line of thought, political branding could benefit from the rise of social networks that promote more authenticity in relationships, due to their unmediated quality. Therefore, we explore the possibility of a more personable display of information through photographs on the Facebook pages of three Romanian women politicians – Elena Udrea, Alina Gorghiu and Oana Niculescu-Mizil. Preliminary findings indicate that politicians mostly use Facebook photographs to focus mainly on their official position and professional activities, not on personal angles of their lives, thus not making a clear distinction between the opportunities offered by traditional media versus social media, particularly Facebook.

Keywords: social media; Facebook political branding; Facebook photographs; Romanian women politicians.

1. Introduction

Nowadays, Facebook enabled communication gains greater importance in image building efforts of private and public persons alike. However, it is interesting to see if these distinct categories use social networking in the same way to reach their objectives or if they employ different communication strategies.

This paper analyzes the way in which Facebook is used by three Romanian women politicians, namely Elena Udrea, Alina Gorghiu and Oana Niculescu-Mizil, belonging to PDL (Democratic Liberal Party), PNL (National Liberal Party) and PSD (Social Democratic Party), the three main Romanian political parties. We intend to focus on their use of Facebook photographs, as the visual elements of online identity-building are less researched, although crucial in establishing a certain identity.

Firstly, we discuss the changes that new media brought in the field of communication and how they influence the process of political brand building. In addition, we also focus on the use of Facebook photographs as image vectors in supporting online personal branding efforts. Our aim is to establish the level of development reached in this field up to this moment and to select best practices in building a political brand online.

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*** Popular phrase used in response to a person who has made an unbelievable or outlandish claim, common on many forums around the Internet.

We then examine the collected data regarding Facebook photographs of the three Romanian party members. For this purpose, we illustrate the way these politicians use visual cues as part of their online political branding strategy and show the similarities and differences between them as they surface from our analysis. Specifically, we are interested in investigating if they use Facebook photographs in order to support their offline professional activities or rather to uncover more of their private life.

2. The rise of social networks: gaining access to private information

The World Wide Web has suffered many transformations since its inception, and nowadays we are experiencing a new reality that holds the promise of radical change in communication – the emergence of the Web 2.0. The new reality also triggered the introduction of new syntagms like "web as platform", "digital democracy", "knowledge economy", "open source", "collaborative web", "the cult of the amateur" etc. (Shih, 2009; Tapscott, 2009; Wittkower, 2010), describing various aspects of the new type of communication on the Internet: participation, affiliation, content creation, dialogue, sharing, accessibility, adaptability.

The new "digital democracy" is centered around sharing and being connected with the whole world in online social experiences. Hence, it is commonplace to assert that the Web 2.0 has changed the way people communicate by facilitating information sharing and co-producing, encouraging communication and eliminating spatial and temporal boundaries. In addition, Web 2.0 grants access to a new way of communicating that is more direct and more accessible for any type of audience.

Another important aspect of the Web 2.0 is the fact that users are not passive consumers of information – not anymore. The rise of the "participatory culture" (Tapscott, 2009, p. 114) on the Web has offered everyone the chance to be content creators themselves, in the sense that there is a vast array of knowledge that Internet users can share with others in the shape of textual, photographic or video material. It has also introduced a new type of communication, that does not include the "one-to-many" model anymore – just the opposite: "In the PC Era, anyone could become a producer. In the Internet era, anyone could become a publisher. In the early days, publishers used the Internet solely as a one-to-many channel to broadcast media" (Shih, 2009, p. 26).

Social networks are probably the most visible aspect of the Web 2.0 in the sense that their expansion has greatly exceeded initial predictions. The main reason for this rapid development, as research points out, is determined by the specific differences of social media, as compared to traditional ones: "digitalization, interactivity, hypertextuality, dispersion and virtuality" (Rotariu, 2010, p. 114). Another study reveals that "on Facebook, Twitter or even YouTube, people do not solely listen to or watch what they are offered, but they participate in the communicational process – they ask questions, give answers, have opinions, take a stand, forward information, state their preferences" (Ulmanu, 2011, p. 211). Furthermore, Ileana Rotariu (2010, p. 130) shows that on social media, consumers gain control over information, which enhances the appeal of social networks: "Consumers and users are able to adapt their own media consumption in order to create highly individualized menus that correspond and serve their own specific needs".

Among the most popular social networking sites we find Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, MySpace and GooglePlus. While all of them have their fair share of users, eResearch (2012)

statistics confirm that Facebook stands out with a total of 850.723.940 users worldwide, out of which 4.552.374 are Romanian.

Internet specialists (Shih, 2009; Wittkower, 2010) presents the story of Facebook and its inception, the starting point being that this social network that became extremely popular over a short period of time – it was only launched on February 4, 2004. Initially, Facebook was conceived as a network for Harvard students only, but in 2006 its notoriety took it outside the college communication area, making it available to people all over the world, students and non-students alike. In this respect, Internet specialist Clara Shih points out that millions of people around the world are displaying their lives on Facebook: "logged in, updating their status, interacting with friends, interacting with brands, providing valuable information for you to be able to understand them better, and learning about you in return" (Shih, 2009, p. 4).

With the introduction of new media – and particularly social networks, information consumption has changed its patterns in the sense that nowadays people require more than traditional media were able to offer: accessible information, instantaneous news delivery, discourse authenticity and personalisation, interaction and feedback possibilities. In support of this idea, an article entitled "Wall to Wall or Face to Face" shows that "Facebook has radically reconstituted the ability for expression and access to information and other people" (Wittkower, 2010, p. 235).

3. Building a political brand online. Facebook and its implications for political communication

Online branding is an essential element of the 21st century. Initially used for business purposes, as a facilitator of purchase decision, nowadays branding cannot be eluded by any sector of activity that relies on its audience to function properly. That is applicable in politics as well. Moreover, studies (Omojola, 2008; Wittkower, 2010) show that branding in connection to the Internet (and to social networks) becomes more and more important, as people turn to the web in order to obtain direct information about politicians.

Why are social media – and Facebook in particular – essential when it comes to political communication? One factor that should be taken into consideration is that, compared to traditional media, online social networks are not mediated by journalists, who decide what is newsworthy or not (Shih, 2009; Scott, 2010; Zandt, 2010). Specialists (Shih, 2009; Zandt, 2010) argue the fact that classic mass media function as gatekeepers, deciding what kind of information should be accepted and which excluded, as opposed to social networks that are managed by the user itself. Facebook enables people to make themselves heard, whereas traditional media are seen as "marginalizing or otherwise ignoring voices that can share ideas for systemic change" (Zandt, 2010, p. 19). Customarily, publishers functioned as gatekeepers – deciding the public agenda; nowadays, their position is threatened: "an entire shift is happening, both in how we obtain information and in what we do with that information once we've processed it" (Zandt, 2010, p. 7). We can remark that, with this shift, publishers have a diminished influence, as on Facebook everyone can set their own agenda and decide what is worthy of communicating. To support this theory we have Mark Zuckerberg, the creator of Facebook, saying that "(...) we turn into a massive publisher. Twenty to 30 snippets of information or stories a day, that's like 300 million stories a day. It gets to a point where we are

publishing more in a day that most other publications have in the history of their whole existence" (Kessler, 2007). On Facebook, activities linked to personal branding can take up as much space and time as their creator prefers, and their public impact is immediately noticeable, without any other exterior interference.

We can consider the politician as a storyteller with an audience that needs to remain enthusiastic in their direction. Therefore, he/she should be extremely interested in offering more (and less mediated) information than regular broadcasters render to the public. That is where Facebook should step in, by creating personal stories, managed by the politician himself/herself. On Facebook, people are given the chance to redefine themselves. Their profile is their creation, and it represents them. In the new reality of social networks, the idiomatic expression "seeing is believing" regains power – in the sense that concrete, factual information can be interwoven as to create a desired image. After all, social media facilitates "sharing, connecting and story-telling" (Zandt, 2010, p. 30). Roberto Álvarez del Blanco (2010, p. 202) outlines the fact that "storytelling makes sense of the world and gives meaning to a personal brand. Society needs stories and personal meaning (passionate, intelligent, secure, friendly, extravagant...) and they are only valued if they have genuine meaning". Therefore, as political researchers (Sălcudeanu, Aparaschivei, Toader, 2009, p. 187) show, the Internet offers candidates the possibility of humanizing their image, thus bringing them closer to their voters, as opposed to traditional media, which isolate the two.

But how does the Internet – and social networks – influence political branding? Several studies (Guțu-Tudor, 2008; Tudor, 2008; Toader, Grigoraşi, Frunză, 2011) have shown the importance of new media in the creation of political discourse, by emphasizing new aspects that online communication reveals to politicians. First of all, "the limited volume of broadcast space has been replaced by almost limitless availability, through the digital encoding of sound, text and images, the use of fiber optic lines, breakthroughs in switching technologies and a massive expansion in the availability of frequencies for transmission" (Axford & Huggins, 2001, p. 14). Now, on account of the proliferation of digital media, politicians have the possibility to communicate with their audience without the previous restrictions of time or space – which greatly enhances their chances to create their image as desired. In addition, social networks like Facebook provide unmediated communication between a politician and his/her public: "communication through Facebook resembles more and more face-to-face communication by interpersonal messages that are sent in real time and interactivity. (…) through Facebook and social networks they get closer to the citizens" (Toader *et al.*, 2011, p. 143).

Broadly defined, political marketing "is that part of marketing that is destined to influence voters about political issues, candidates for public offices or public agenda themes" (Tudor, 2008, p. 17). Generally, a brand is considered to be "the sum total of proprietary visual, emotional, natural and cultural image or attributes associated with a person, company, product or service" (Omojola, 2008, pp. 127-128). Therefore, branding should not be limited to companies, products and services, as personal branding is a promise of value as well. Omojola (2008) argues that political personal branding separates politicians from their peers, colleagues and competitors.

"Brand identity should help to establish the relationship between your personal brand and the target group by generating a value proposition involving functional and emotional benefits as well as elements of self-expression" (del Blanco, 2010, p. 7). Political branding is therefore a challenging activity that requires positive reinforcement of the politician-audience connection with every occasion, whether in tangible or emotional ways. Political affil-

iation, official and unofficial activities, personal style or manner of speaking – all these features (and many others) are combined in order to create a politician's identity. As in the case of any other type of branding, in politics the elements of identity should be "grouped together for reasons of coherence. Such groupings provide texture and wholeness to the personal brand" (del Blanco, 2010, p. 7). Hence, online brand management appears to be as important as any offline activities in this area; it should complement them and at the same time function as a tool that brings the politician closer to his/her public, due to its informal character.

Politicians should understand that their online presence is meaningful and needs to be coherent and supportive in connection to their general image, but not double it. They should not be redundant, as social networks offer them the chance to show their public a different facet of their personality. With the help of social networks like Facebook, "the dull character that appeared on the TV screen in every Romanian's living-room was brought to life. The politician on Facebook listens to certain music, quotes his/her favourite books, uploads pictures with his/her children and family puppies or remembers his/her childhood. (...) This type of communication can help the politician to convey information about himself/herself on a different level, focusing on his/her human quality, and thus, getting closer to the electorate" (Toader *et al.*, 2011, p. 214).

"Information, communication, and tools on the Web have given individuals not only a voice, but also the power to act and to own their own online identities" (Shih, 2009, p. 23). For instance, building a political brand on Facebook is not regulated by the traditional media system, therefore it only depends on the individual that creates it. On a social network, politicians can choose to display a more personal, "colloquial" image, as shown by some authors, who state that new media "can be an extremely important informal medium of influence" (Zbuchea, Pînzaru, Gălălae, 2009, p. 169). In the same manner, C. Shih points out that "online social networks have defined a new kind of relationship (…) that is more casual" (Shih, 2009, p. 45). But even though the relationship is more informal, it still serves a business purpose in the end – measured on Facebook by indicators as "fans", "likes", "shares". Therefore, personal branding "is build to help one gather more fans, more success and, indirectly, more personal benefits" (Bogdan, 2010, p. 149). For politicians, building a closer relationship with their audience should be a vital part of their communication strategy and brand building. Bogdan (2010) shows that in this case, personal branding is based on two main elements: charisma and fans. But why are Facebook fans such an asset for a politician? "Depending on your communication style, fans can be your readers, your clients, your influencers, respectively the communication vectors that will promote your message" (Bădău, 2011, p. 143).

Since Facebook communication has the possibility of being more unconstrained by formal rules than its traditional counterparts, "users can present themselves online in diverse forms, including photos, videos, and more" (Wittkower, 2010, p. 235). Politicians can use such an opportunity to create interesting content on their Facebook profiles – content that will complete their online identity and help them gain more fans – which can translate into voters, when needed. After all, the importance of personal political branding resides in its objective: "building a solid relationship between a politician and his publics" (Omojola, 2008, p. 130). As a consequence, building relationships online should focus on a less fabricated, more natural attitude towards communication with the public, as studies show: "Adopting transparency as a core value and actively encouraging and fostering its application by making information readily available, will be critical in establishing trusting, long-term relationships