

## CRITERIA FOR POLITICAL COMMUNICATION AND MASS INFLUENCE IN THE INTERNET AGE \*

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Abstract: For many of us, online communication is no longer a difficult process to understand, but on the contrary, it is the key to success both on personal and in business level. Almost nothing can be done without using the internet, the online environment being the tool that distinguishes between profit and loss, between the winner and the loser. Obviously, political life cannot function effectively at the moment without the widespread use of the Internet. Internet communication is generated by a multitude of actions and processes through which a series of messages are transmitted, which then take various forms. The advantage of such communication is the efficiency and easy way in which messages are transmitted to a large mass of voters.

In this study, the author examines how the Internet influences the political communication of today's times, as well as the propagation power of political messages it has on the masses of voters.

**Keywords:** political communication, internet, influence, political message, voters.

If in the early 1990s the Internet was not known to the general public, it subsequently experienced an extremely rapid evolution, managing to become indispensable in all fields of activity. Although there were many technical difficulties, as this segment developed and began to be used by more and more people, the distances between them decreased and communication became easier. Over time, the movement of political communication in the online environment became increasingly evident and the classical form in the public square was less and less used, from rallies and from TV, but without giving up on this variant entirely. We do not rule out the possibility that in the near future or further away

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election campaigns and political message transmitted in traditional forms will be abandoned, and online will become the only or most widely used form of political communication.

Tuman defines political communication as “the discursive process through which political information is distributed” and considers that “awareness, ignorance, manipulation, consensus, disagreement, action or passivity” is promoted<sup>1</sup>. In other words, the author refers to the interaction between politicians/candidates and voters, and social media brings to our attention the technical possibilities and online variants that enable individuals to create content and disseminate opinions, information and experiences<sup>2</sup>.

Mass communication is a complex phenomenon, especially today when it can be achieved much more easily than in past decades. Over time, it has experienced various classifications and definition attempts, from targeting wide audiences through publicly transmitted messages, to electronic or mechanical multiplication with the addressability of relatively large audiences, but with limited feedback possibilities. Some of the specialists consider it to have the status of industrially produced goods and content personally and privately consumed by a particular public. Others, a sum between institutions and techniques, with modern distribution of content and heterogeneous, wide and dispersed audiences. Whatever the form of defining or classifying mass communication, it cannot be lacking in the political space.

Among the specialists in the field, the notion of mass communication is synonymous with that of media. Yves Lavoine considers that the media refers at the same time to – a technique or set of techniques, a set of messages created by these techniques and all the organisations that produce or deal with these messages<sup>3</sup>. What should be remembered is the concept of broadcasting a message to multiple receivers at once, the media being the tool that ensures the fastest transmission, across large geographical areas and to growing groups of individuals.

As expected, mass communication has successfully adopted, in addition to traditional media types, new trends or *new media*, which combine all the elements: texts, graphics, sounds, moving images, synthesis images, technological facilities, in a word – *multimedia*. Thus, online systems (e-mail, websites, social media networks) were born, with an ability to reach very large audiences through the speed of transmission. The forms of interpersonal communication, with the transmission of messages manufactured by specialists, but also by private individuals, were generated. The basic principles of mass communication are also preserved online – communicators, channel, public, content.

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<sup>1</sup> Apud Sorin Tudor, *Politica 2.0.08. Politica marketingului politic*, Bucharest, Tritonic Publishing, 2008, p. 29.

<sup>2</sup> Tudor Sălcudeanu, Paul Aparaschivei, Florența Toader, *Bloguri, Facebook și politică*, Bucharest, Tritonic Publishing, 2009. p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> Mihai Coman, *Introducere în sistemul mass – media*, Iași, Polirom Publishing, 1999, p. 19.

After analysing the statistical data, we find that worldwide, the number of internet users has greatly increased, from 90,000 to 304 million, from 1993 to 2000<sup>4</sup>. The appearance of the Internet has irreversibly altered the way political communication manifests itself and has linked it to technology in all its aspects. If in the past journalists and politicians could convey the political message in controllable forms, today their power to influence and manipulate the masses is diminished, the direction being largely given by social networks. The political message is personalized, distributed and debated in virtual influence groups<sup>5</sup>, online political communication having multiple advantages in the opinion of specialists in the field<sup>6</sup>. Moreover, the digital revolution seems spectacular if we compare its evolution with other media. Thus, to reach 50 million users, radio took 38 years, television took 13 years, while the internet took only 4 years. Analyzing the evolution of the years 2000–2007 we see the increase of internet users in Europe to 315 million, in the USA to 233 million, and in Asia to more than 700 million users<sup>7</sup>. The evolution of the digital market for the period 2008–2013 shows us 2.9 billion internet users<sup>8</sup>, almost 3 billion in 2015<sup>9</sup>, to exceed 4 billion users in early 2018, according to information in the Global Digital study published in January and conducted by We Are Social and Hootsuite. The study also states that 2017 saw an increase of almost 250 million internauts, with 200 million people purchasing a mobile device and half of mobile devices in use worldwide being intelligent<sup>10</sup>.

John Bennet, data and communication expert, editor and writer of cross-platform content, in the material “*23 Amazing Statistics on the Internet and Social Media in 2020*”, updated on 1 August 2020, gives us an insight into the internet and social media worldwide, from which we learn that “This year has been an explosive one for the social media world. With all the online regulations, the revolutions of Twitter hashtags and the Facebook privacy scandals, the internet has given us a great theatre”<sup>11</sup>. From the first

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<sup>4</sup> Călin Sinescu, *Internetul și comunicarea politică*, p. 1, available at [http://cogito.ucdc.ro/nr\\_1/9%20-%20Calin%20Sinescu%20-%20INTERNETUL%20SI%20COMUNICAREA%20POLITICA.pdf](http://cogito.ucdc.ro/nr_1/9%20-%20Calin%20Sinescu%20-%20INTERNETUL%20SI%20COMUNICAREA%20POLITICA.pdf), accessed at July 3, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Tasește Tănase, *Comunicarea politică prin social media și reacțiile publicului online*, Bucharest, University Publishing House, 2014, p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> Philip J. Maarek, *Communication & marketing de l'homme politique*, Litec, Paris, 2007, p. 269.

<sup>7</sup> Călin Sinescu, *Internetul și comunicarea politică*, p. 1, available at [http://cogito.ucdc.ro/nr\\_1/9%20-%20Calin%20Sinescu%20-%20INTERNETUL%20SI%20COMUNICAREA%20POLITICA.pdf](http://cogito.ucdc.ro/nr_1/9%20-%20Calin%20Sinescu%20-%20INTERNETUL%20SI%20COMUNICAREA%20POLITICA.pdf), accessed at July 7, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> *2,9 miliarde de utilizatori de Internet. Studiu: evoluția pieței digitale mondiale din 2008 până în 2013*, available at <https://www.retail-fmcg.ro/esential/2-9-miliarde-de-utilizatori-de-internet-studiu-evolutia-pieteii-digitale-mondiale-din-2008-pana-in-2013.html>, accessed at July 15, 2020.

<sup>9</sup> *ANCOM: Aproape 3 miliarde de utilizatori de internet în întreaga lume*, available at <https://www.bursa.ro/ancom-aproape-3-miliarde-de-utilizatori-de-internet-in-intreaga-lume-20819626>, accessed at July 3, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> *Numărul de utilizatori de internet din lume a depășit pragul de 4 miliarde*, available at <https://www.go4it.ro/content/video/numarul-de-utilizatori-de-internet-din-lume-a-depasit-pragul-de-4-miliarde-16963938/>, accessed at July 12, 2020.

<sup>11</sup> John Bennet, *23 Statistici uimitoare despre Internet și social-media în 2020*, available at <https://ro.wizcase.com/blog/statistici-uimitoare-despre-internet-si-social-media/>, accessed at July 21, 2020.

statistic published by him, we learn that “the GDP of countries seems to be strongly correlated with the spread of the Internet, with the richest countries having a greater penetration of the Internet and vice versa. The difference between the number of internet users in North Korea and Qatar is 98.4% (Despite its size and population, North Korea has internet access for only 0.06% citizens, while Qatar and the United Arab Emirates have 99% of its citizens)”, for the following statistics to reveal the trends of continents or certain countries, by comparison – “Over the past 18 years, Africa has seen a remarkable increase of almost 10,000%, while North America has seen an increase of 219%”, “Internet use is most prevalent in North America, as well as in North and Western Europe, with penetration of over 90%, remaining low in Central and East Africa by less than 20%”, “Users in Thailand spend more time online per day than anywhere else in the world. They average up to 9 hours and 38 minutes spent online each day, while the American average is much more modest, just 6 hours and 30 minutes of web browsing”<sup>12</sup>. The most used browser is Chrome, Google is the favorite search engine, with 90.61% of users, and Facebook is still the most popular social media platform, with over 1 billion frequently active users. “Facebook has over 2 billion monthly users, over 1 billion of whom access the site very regularly. YouTube has just over 1.5 billion users accessing content, making it the second most popular platform”<sup>13</sup>.

From these few data presented we see how the Internet soon became an important tool for mass communication, and electoral communication would not have deviated from this principle. In the new context, political parties address the electoral message directly to voters, without having to go through the journalistic filter. The broadcast is fast, the volume of messages transmitted is high, the transmission costs are low, and the visibility of small parties, deficient on the media, is high. This tool allows effective communication between parties and citizens, despite the fact that not all countries of the world have high speed or even internet access<sup>14</sup>.

Another advantage is permanent access to the content of the political message, requiring only a device – computer, laptop, tablet or phone – that the user can also use for active participation in the debate and interactive feedback. The rules by which information is generated are missing, and a user can also be a consumer and content creator at the same time. The consequence was the decline of the traditional press, but with exponential increase in views for the press that has gone online and understood that this is the only way to keep readers’ attention.

In recent years we are experiencing a strong development of social networks, especially Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. In the political sphere they have started to be used more and more intensively by both citizens and political institutions (politicians, parties, political communities, etc.). The use of these relatively new tools by political institutions has generated political communication

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>14</sup> See North Korea, according to Bennet's statistics.

based on social media and its inclusion in the basic strategy for election campaigns. Without considering that we are exaggerating, we see that social media has become over time, but especially in the last election years, increasingly important in creating real support for candidates in obtaining mandates. Thus, political communication has evolved and forced politicians to modernise and open themselves to the new techniques and tools that have brought them much closer to the electorate and in a direct connection with them. Voters, as internet users, have become decision-makers<sup>15</sup> in the traditional politician-voter relationship. At the same time, social media has been found to have made its mark on political discourse as a result of the increasing use of social networks and their potential to increase political participation. By spreading information (Twitter) and using pages or groups (Facebook), in addition to political discussions between the electorate and candidates, it was also possible to collect the necessary data and information in political analyses or election campaigns.

Since 2008 we can say that new media has become an important engine of political communication and the influence of the masses. As television had been for Kennedy in 1960, thus becoming a trailblazer in this segment, so the Internet for Obama in 2008 was seen as the one that paved the way for online election campaigns. To win the presidential election he bet on *Facebook* pages, *YouTube* channels and personal websites, managing to combine in his campaign strategy the two directions – traditional and new media – in an innovative way for that time, proving the winning formula<sup>16</sup>. This is the year in which mentalities have been changed in political communication, techniques in election campaigns and people, if we refer to the change in attitude that politicians have had towards voters. Social media has become a very serious strategic point for election campaigns in the coming period, especially since a simple online discussion can become a discussion pursued by the whole planet.

After this moment, the need for politicians to be present on social media and their growing need to communicate their political ideas online become increasingly evident. At the same time, new media has enabled the identification of community problems and a better knowledge of the candidate by the electorate<sup>17</sup>. As in other fields of activity, in politics online marketing together with offline (traditional) marketing is currently the success in election campaigns, combining actions for the new generation and actions for the old generation. Classic campaigns are no longer

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<sup>15</sup> Jose van Dijck, *Users like you? Theorizing agency in user-generated content*, in “Media, Culture & Society”, vol. 31(1), 2009, pp. 41–58, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0163443708098245>, accessed at July 3, 2020.

<sup>16</sup> Mihaela Bărbieru, *The implications of social media in political communication. A new form of electoral campaign*, in “Revista Universitară de Sociologie”, Year XI, no. 1(21), Craiova, Beladi Publishing House, 2015, pp. 44–46.

<sup>17</sup> Stefan Stieglitz, Linh Dang-Xuan, *Social media and political communication: a social media analytics framework*, in “Social Network Analysis and Mining”, 3, pp. 1277–1291, available at <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs13278-012-0079-3>, accessed at July 15, 2020.

enough to attract all voters to the polls, just as online campaigns can't yet attract the entire electoral pool. We believe that in the not-too-distant future the greater share in political action will belong to the online environment and social media as a result of the growing number of internet users, but without being able to say whether the traditional form will disappear entirely.

As I have already specified, new-type politicians interact directly with voters, which is why they have had to be more human in their eyes. They have become less rigid, more transparent, more open and more flexible. The electorate has changed by becoming more demanding and attentive to everything around it, implicitly and to political life, more connected and open to interaction and debate. Thus, pressure criticism was generated, which did not infrequently become effective action. Politicians are increasingly willing to have generous exposure online and also provide private life information, aware that voters are avid for new things in their private lives, not just politics. As a conclusion, it is not infrequently that candidates have consciously exposed their families or passions, pets or excursions online, in a word, pretty much everything they thought could arouse the interest of the interns.

Through online access, and election messages have changed, with internet policy generating a more personalized form, with targeted addressability, at a more dynamic pace, in which everything can undergo major changes from day to day. Thus, attention-grabbing has become everyone's concern, aware that it is the reforeth that internet consumers read political information. Obviously, all kinds of bombastic titles began to appear, but also the famous, from now on, fake news spread mostly by journalists, taken over and shared by others, without any prior documentation. Messages are both general and niche, designed to the moment, with the loyalty of the target audience being much more important than unilateral messages. In addition to the advantages mentioned for social networks, we also mention the ease with which search engines are used, news communicated immediately, even in real time, the rapid fight against negative news that appears about the candidate or the party, the possibility to get in touch with various specialists, in other conditions being quite difficult.

2012 was important for Romania through the two rounds of elections, local and parliamentary, and through the dynamics of the political scene generated by changes in the party system, in the political system, by the premieres or changes of situation<sup>18</sup>. Social media has been used in both campaigns and in the referendum between them for both promotion and attacks against political opponents. It was also used to gather the supporters, organize rallies or avoid awkward debates, and Facebook became a political tool, basically an arena for the political struggle in which all the virtual supporters of the two camps could be involved<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> Mihaela Bărbieru, *Alegerile administrației locale din anul 2012. Rezultatele și validarea lor în județul Dolj*, in "Arhivele Olteniei", Serie nouă, nr. 27/2013, Bucharest, Romanian Academy Publishing House, p. 219.

<sup>19</sup> Monica Pătruț, *Candidates in the presidential elections in Romania (2014): the use of social media in political marketing*, in "Studies and Scientific Researches. Economics Edition", no. 21/2015, p. 130.

If 2012 is for our country the year in which the online environment became effervescent in the political context (election campaigns, political communication, political messages, attacks, etc.), it is 2014 that gives us the surprise of electing the president in a determined online variant. Social media was the great novelty of the political moment, with its major influence in overturning the situation between the two rounds, but also by the clear effect produced for the future. Since then, no political party or candidate has allowed itself to bypass online or neglect its huge potential. It became extremely clear to all politicians that online influenced things so much that a candidate who neither his own party gave him a chance to win, with a campaign staff, not very numerous, but well prepared in the virtual segment, managed to turn the situation in his favor and become president. Iohannis's well-structured campaign on social media focused on quality and diverse materials, on the coherence between the message and the candidate's image, between the needs of the electorate and the message, on establishing a target audience in urban areas between the ages of 18 and 35. Clichés were avoided and effective messages were sent to the target group<sup>20</sup>. Although the candidate had serious communication skills, all these online strategies, to which we add the actions of the diaspora by transmitting in real time the grievances of the polling stations on social media<sup>21</sup>, all this turned Iohannis from the loser into the big winner of the election. Subsequently, following electoral or context analyses carried out by both sociologists and politicians, journalists or mere internauts, the conclusion was unanimous – in the 2014 presidential elections the decisive role was played not by the candidates, but by social media.

In 2016, in local elections, candidates lined up with the online trend. Facebook has become the main social media platform through which they communicated, with broadcasters losing their primacy both locally and nationally. Candidates initiated direct communication with voters, with TV appearances greatly diminished. Compared to the previous campaign, being on social media has become a necessity for all candidates in 2016, so we can say that it is the time when online becomes an important part of the strategy of campaign and political communication for the Romanian political environment. Voters are much more active, lacking in restraint in asking questions to any candidate or making proposals for community development, and the most accessed posts are those with political programs, which result in greater interest, compared to previous years, for the community and opportunities for development or increased living conditions. Basically, what happened in 2014 in the presidential election has made its irreversible mark on subsequent elections.

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<sup>20</sup> Mihaela Bărbieru, *Accuracy Data of the Presidential Voting Outcomes to an Inferential Bias of the New Romanian Electoral Code and Electronic Vote (2014)*, in "Revista de Științe Politice. Revue des Sciences Politiques", nr. 45/2015, Craiova, Universitaria Publishing House, pp. 135–147.

<sup>21</sup> An impressive number of images of Romanian citizens abroad standing in endless queues to exercise their right to vote in the first ballot were posted on Facebook in real time. Images of embassy doors closing in front of those who hadn't got to vote created a great deal of excitement online. The images were commented on and shared in Facebook, then picked up by the media.

It was realized that social media has a great capacity to influence the masses, and the Internet has become absolutely indispensable not only for the entire political class, but also for voters.

In the 2020 election year, the internet is a space where political practices have become commonplace, especially since the pandemic triggered by Covid 19 forces parties to show up more online. Online election campaigns are constantly improved, political communication is no longer unknown to either elected or voters, the conditions for informing citizens are greatly improved, there are states where the electorate has never experienced better information during election campaigns than now. Obviously, the influence of the masses is also part of the same parameters of the online strategic evolution. Note that the Internet is a tool with multiple possibilities of exploitation not yet fully discovered and which is put both at the service of the citizen and in the service of the state.

Through political competition in online the electoral spectrum has been exceeded, the voter being seen as a consumer of political offers, and the polls being directed only on problems, not on solutions to the problems raised. However, the online environment retains a smaller sense that the population matters to politicians only every four years, as happens in traditional environments. Politicians are more easily targeted at masses or individuals and in times when there is no electoral competition. Online communities are stronger and more numerous now than in previous years, and politicians can communicate, transmit election messages and interact with their voters throughout their term of office, not just during election campaigns. We can say that a participatory democracy can develop through online means, in which promoters are political parties in constant contact with voters. As an open space, where everyone knows each other, the Internet contributes greatly to communication and interaction, as well as to the emergence of political ideas or business. Nor should we forget the electoral behaviour of voters who, through internet consumption, have changed. This type of electorate is more educated, more active, more demanding, up-to-date with news, learned with remote work, with online press, with interpersonal communication through messages. Thus, it is mandatory for politicians to adapt their political messages according to the requirements of this kind of electorate. The present generates a future in which online political competition and online election campaigns will gain more and more ground in the face of traditional methods and will exceed the exclusive electoral spectrum.

As a natural evolution of things, electronic voting has also become a necessity in the context of the evolution of the Internet. In 2002, the European Commission recommended the electronic voting system to the European states through the CyberVote programme, which was tested in the same year in France for the local council, and in 2003 in Germany at the University of Bremen. Other countries that tested electronic voting were Australia, Sweden, Austria, Canada, Japan, Estonia, Switzerland and Norway. A real success was achieved by Estonia

in 2011, when it was used by 24% of voters<sup>22</sup>. For now, due to numerous suspicions of fraud, this voting system is not widely used, with many of the states that have tested it by having already given up, such as Germany, which banned it in its entirety in 2009, Ireland, which introduced it in 2002 and subsequently gave it up, the United Kingdom, which tried it in certain local elections but did not generalize it, as well as other states that tested it without approving it by law<sup>23</sup>. France and the Netherlands have given up for security reasons in 2017 and Switzerland in 2019<sup>24</sup>. The exception to the rule makes Estonia, which uses it in its entirety, even with the possibility for the voter to change its option. Although it is a thorny issue for now, raising the suspicion of fraud, there are more and more technological developments in recent times for the completion of this electronic voting system and the internet voting system. We believe that these problems will be overcome in the not too distant future so that electronic voting and internet voting can be implemented on a macro scale. We also believe that such an approach is all the more necessary today if we refer to the health crisis triggered by Covid 19.

Doing a retrospective analysis of political campaigns, political communication and politics in general, we believe that conceptual changes have taken place in the way they are approached in the context of the emergence of the Internet in our lives. There has been, and continues to be, a progressive integration of the Internet into political systems by joining it with other media channels, but not completely replacing them to this point. We also believe that there has been a kind of revolution by changing relations between the elected and the electors, if we take into account the possibility of all citizens to take an active part in the political life of states. The political message is disseminated and debated incomparably more than traditional methods, and social media users are also vectors of political communication and influencing the masses, not just consumers.

Undoubtedly, the future places social media as the main channel of political communication, and candidates who do not use it will cancel out all their chances in political or electoral competition and become invisible to the masses. The electoral strategy will be built exclusively around this means of communication and influencing the masses.

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<sup>22</sup> D. Chilea, *Votul electronic, o necesitate în epoca tehnologiei digitale*, in “Expert electoral”, nr. 4(8)/2014, pp. 33–38; A. Trechsel, M. Alvarez, *Internet Voting in Estonia*, in “Voting Technology Project”, 2008, available at [http://vote.caltech.edu/sites/default/files/vtp\\_wp60.pdf](http://vote.caltech.edu/sites/default/files/vtp_wp60.pdf), accessed at July 12, 2020.

<sup>23</sup> D. Chilea, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

<sup>24</sup> *Votul electronic nu este încă o soluție*, available at <https://www.apti.ro/votul-electronic-nu-e-inca-o-solutie>, accessed at July 12, 2020.