A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE ROMANIAN PARLIAMENTARY PARTY WEBSITES DURING THE PRE-ELECTION PERIOD

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Abstract

In Romania the political party websites have developed since 2000 (Mocan, Bădescu& Marian, 2003) and have been used to disseminate information about candidates, alliances, campaigns and political agenda. This study will focus on the analysis of the Romanian political parties (www.pnl.ro, www.psd.ro www.aliantaromaniadreapta.eu, www.udmr.ro) before the parliamentary elections in 2012. The aim is to find the place of these websites on the trajectory Web 1.0 - Web 2.0.

Starting from the well-known models of political communication (Gibson & Ward, 2000; Foot & Schneider, 2006; Lilleker & alii, 2011) I will analyse the degree in which the websites of these parties may contribute to the informing, connecting, involving and mobilizing of the visitors. The results will show that the websites of the political parties have greatly improved since 2000. But the political parties use their websites more to inform and less to involve/ mobilize their visitors. The way of creating their websites is to be found in the Web 1.0 era.

Keywords: political communication, National Liberal Party, Liberal Democratic Party, Social Democratic Party, The Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania, website, Web 2.0, year 2012.

The Web campaign – a new stage in the election communication

In a short period of time, the internet has become an important source of information for many people and an essential communication means for political parties. For the political parties, the start was given in the USA in 1996 (Conway,& Dorner, 2004 : 5). Stimulated by the low cost of the internet and by the possibility of communicating with voters without being disturbed by the traditional media, the political parties continued to use and invest in websites. From the very beginning, to have a website was synonym with to be up-to-date with technology and to be a modern party. Nowadays to be absent from "the electronic agora" implies a lack of credibility (Russmann, 2010: 7).

With the help of websites, the information can be permanently updated, reaching, at the same time, the party members, mass-media and voters, it may be directed towards a certain public (Foot & Schneider 2006: 22). The same information strictly controlled by the party and it is more attractively presented by means of images and multimedia characteristics. A website which contains images and multimedia features is more efficient in providing its message than a website which contains only texts. (Gibson & Ward 2000 : 303)

The modern campaigns promoted on the Web increase their efficiency by the rapid answers provided to sympathizers or opponents, by the possibility of instantly reaching a greater number of new publics in an interactive manner. The creation of networking helps parties in strengthening their internal bonds (between election local organizations, elected politicians, the central headquarters and the internal pressure groups) or external bonds (between parties and interest groups, unions, governmental departments, mass-media or other global organizations). Lately, the parties' websites provide links with famous politicians' blogs, with MySpace, YouTube, Facebook and Twitter. (Foot & Schneider 2006: 24). The

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citizens' participation or involvement is stimulated by direct and individual communication, by the possible transformation of a website visitors into its co-producers or into distributors of messages, downloaded from the respective website, towards friends, family, acquaintances (Russmann 2010 : 5-6).

This new style of political e-campaign is considered a form of professionalizing the activities of the parties in their relation with voters (Gibson&Römmele, 2009: 265). The professionalization of the instruments and strategies used by parties and candidates in order to appeal to voters is very likely to the one used in the business communication: on the electronic market, parties "sell" their products to consumers/ voters who seem to be more and more instable. In the conceiving of personalized and differentiated messages, it is obligatory to use new instruments (data bases, email, Web, phone, opinion polls and focus groups).

I agree with the functions of political websites, identified by Ward, Gibson & Nixon (2003 : 11-14): a) a library/ an archive which provides citizens a lot of information; b) an instrument of active and continuous campaigning by means of which parties may send their correct messages to the target-public; c) a means of mobilizing and organizing their own members, voters and donors.

If all these activities had been accomplished by means of the website, the political parties would succeed in consolidating "the visibility capital" in the virtual environment (Beciu 2011 : 280). But the use of the website is dependent on the following factors: party size, party status (governing party/ the opponent party), temporal influence and ideological influence (Druckman 2007: 426-429). The small parties have the tendency of using the website more than big parties, but the websites of big parties provide more facilities and resources to their visitors, have richer contents than the websites of small parties. The governing parties have the tendency of rarely updating their websites than the opposing parties and they are very interested in stimulating the visitors to visit their websites again (Larsson 2011). Even if it is considered that websites are "permanent structures to mobilize resources not only during campaigns, but also outside of them", most parties have the tendency of improving them during the election campaigns. If we take into account the 2007 presidential elections and ideology, the French right-wing parties provided more information on their websites than the left-wing parties. But the platforms of the left-wing parties covered more the function of mobilizing its visitors than the right-wing parties did (Vaccari 2008:71-74). Other studies showed that the ecologist/ green parties use websites in a new and more creative way than other (Russmann 2010 : 10 ; Strandberg 2009 : 840).

The websites of Romanian political parties – a diachronic perspective

The most comprehensive research on the websites of Romanian political parties was made in the election year 2000 (Mocan, Bădescu & Marian 2003: 161-170). Having as analysis algorithm the axis *information access/ decision taking – interactivity – communication structure decentralization*, the authors studied the websites of the 10 parties which used to govern in Romania and which were on an opponent position (*http://www.pntcd.ro, http://www.pd.ro, http://www.pnl.ro, http://www.rmdsz.ro, http://www.psdr.ro, http://www.psdr.ro, http://www.pdsr.ro, http://www.romare.ro, http://www.ufd.ro, http://www.ancd.ro). Each website was analysed taking into account the degree in which it provided information on the status, structure, political representatives and

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party's agenda, on the news and the events presented in one or more foreign languages, the presence of forums, newsletters, information about the vote, the presence of email addresses belonging to the representatives of the party, the answers to the questions of the website visitors, the information about the local branches or youth organizations, the access to the party's representatives. The results of the study highlighted the fact that through websites, parties highly provided to the citizens the access to information (news, political agenda, press conferences) and that they allowed to voters the access to the party's representatives, to local branches and to youth organizations. Parties were less concerned with facilitating the dialogue with voters, they ignored the citizens' opinions about specific issues and did not offer them any role in taking some decisions. Thus, in 2000 the Romanian parties did not exploit the potential that the internet provided in order to involve the citizens in different forms of communication and decision (Mocan, Bădescu & Marian 2003: 172- 175).

Worldwide the parties' investment in websites is not equal, the website being turned either into a discrete, minimal, slightly observable presence, or into an active, dynamic, sophisticated one. The best political websites provide new or exclusive information, they are interactive, personalized and have a very attractive graphic design (Young 2001: 4). After 2000, the Romanian political parties considered that websites are an instrument that cannot be avoided within the virtual communication strategies. The year 2004 showed that websites may turn into an efficient means, www.băsescu.ro being the political website which has been the most successful within the Romanian political space (Tudor 2008: 149). Without any great effort of the campaign team and using the viral feature of the internet, the website provided its users not only games, but also the possibility of making comments on a blogging platform. In 2007 when the Romanian presidential impeachment referendum took place, the above-mentioned website hosted the digital guerrilla fight between its sustainers and its opponents (Cmeciu, Pătruț, 2009; Momoc, 2011: 82).

The lesson of the year 2004 was learned and it was put into practice during the 2009 presidential campaign which took advantage of the increase of internet users. Using B. Obama's campaign as a model (Ulmanu, 2011: 195-196), the two Romanian presidential finalists, Traian Băsescu and Mircea Geoană, used their promotion websites for their own sympathizers and volunteers (www.mirceageoana.ro, www.geoanapresedinte.com, www.psd.ro, www.pdl.ro, www.romanipentrubasescu.ro, www.basescupresedinte.ro, www.decebasescu.ro, www.basescu-live.ro, www.basescu.ro) și de atac (www.televizorulpresedinte.ro, www.nufigeoana.ro, www.nuvotageoana.ro, www.romaniaantipsd.ro, www.noicuvoi.ro, www.pemarecuel.ro, www.traimbine.ro, www.spunenusituluibasesc.ro, www.antibasescu.com, www.byebyebasescu.com). These reversed-mirror websites (Popescu, Pătruț, Cmeciu, 2010) played a significant role both in providing information to the young people and to the Romanians abroad and in weakening the political image of the opponent.

The political party websites before the 2012 election competition: analysis and results

The campaign for the Romanian parliamentary elections has brought into the completion political parties which have represented both the power and the opposition since 2008 (PSD/ SDP (Social Democratic Party), PNL/ NLP (National Liberal Party), PDL/ LDP (Liberal Democratic Party), UDMR/ DUHG – The Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania), but also new (Partidul Poporului Dan Diaconescu/ People's Party – Dan Diaconescu, Forța Civica/ Civic Force). In order to maximize their chances, the parties formed alliances (The Social-Liberal Union formed of SDP and NLP and the Right Romania Alliance formed of LDP, The Christian Democratic National Peasants' Party and the Civic Force) and invested in their TV and internet communication with the voters. The presence of political parties and Romanian candidates in the virtual environment has surely become a means of permanent communication with voters. The political websites and blogs are not just a mere matter of political fashion, but they turned into necessary political marketing instruments.

Out of the typologies for the analysis of website features, I will use in this study those made by Gibson & Ward, Foot & Schneider, Schweitzer and Lilleker. I will analyze the websites of the parliamentary political parties: www.pnl.ro, www.psd.ro, www.udmr.ro, www.aliantaromaniadreapta.eu (after the establishing of the Right Romania Alliance, this is the link to which we are directed if we access the former DLP link - www.pdl.org.ro). The websites were studied during the pre-election period (October 9 – November 9, 2012). The research questions are the following:

• RQ1- Have the characteristics of the Romanian parliamentary party websites evolved from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0?

• RQ2: To what degree do the Romanian parliamentary party websites contribute to informing, connecting, involving and mobilizing its visitors?

Highlighting the very dynamic character of the internet, the specialists pinpoint the passing from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0. Whereas the Web 1.0 stage or the beginning stage of the internet involves only communication via the email, the dial-up, high costs, websites which cannot be changed by other users, the web 2.0 becomes a synonym of communication in real time, broadband internet (high speed, a better quality/ price measure), blogs, podcasts, social networks, sites which create entire communities. While Web 1.0 is known as "The Read Only Web", Web 2.0 is known as "The Read Write Web" (O'Reilly 2005). While information is more associated with Web 1.0, interactivity is the main activity in web 2.0: the visitor of the website is encouraged to interact at the same time with the host and with other visitors, he is stimulated to stay online and to discuss his ideas and opinions directly on the blogs, on the discussion forums and on the social networking sites (SNS).

Parties gradually adopted those practices which involve and mobilize voters or online supporters and made real progresses in connecting with other parties or organizations by providing the necessary links (Strandberg 2007: 67). In order to establish to which period of the website evolution the parliamentary political websites belong to, I used the features presented in Table 1, marking with "1" their presence and with "0" their absence.

Table1. The web 2.0 features of Romanian parliamentary party websites
(adapted from Lilleker, 2011)

Web 2.0 features	Score			
	PSD/ SDP	PNL/ NLP	PDL/ DLP	UDMR/ DUHG
Weblog	1	1	1	1
news rating facility	0	0	0	0
video TV Spots	1	1	1	1
videos of conferences	1	1	1	1
videos of appearances	1	1	1	1
videos of home/private	0	0	0	0
video rating facility	0	0	0	0
webcam feed	0	0	0	0
photo rating facility	0	0	0	0
prioritise/rank function	0	0	0	0
personal events calendar	0	0	0	0
blog comment facility	1	1	0	0
Wiki	0	0	0	0
collaborative programme	0	0	0	0
collaborative party history	0	0	0	0
collaborative features	0	0	0	0
links to SNS	1	1	1	1
promote via SNS	1	1	1	1
social bookmarking	1	0	0	1
chat facility with party	0	1	0	0
chat facility with others	0	0	0	0
Forum	1	1	1	1
video comment facility	0	0	0	0
video sharing channel	1	1	1	1
photo comment facility	0	0	0	0
Total	10	10	8	9

The results show that the differences between the four websites are small and that all of them mainly have an informative character specific to Web 1.0. Compared to the election year 2000, there have been made significant progress through the inclusion of some features: weblog and discussion forums, videos, video presentations/ appearances, links to SNS and promotion through these social networking sites, online archives which contain the discourses of the most representative party members. But the interactive elements which might have allowed parties to organize internal debates, to provide quick feed-back to visitors and to create online networks with different party groups are not used.

The second research question of our study was focused on the way in which the websites studies contributed to the informing, connecting, involving and mobilizing the voters. The informing practice implies the providing of information about party positions and policies regarding some issues and/ or problems using an online structure. The connecting practice facilitates the online interaction with other users, with socializing networks and especially it allows the placing of the party in a specific cognitive context, thus providing a better understanding for the voters who compare the party with other opponent parties. The involving practice facilitates the interaction with website visitors and the party campaign organizers and the mobilizing practice motivates the sympathizers to promote the party

message online or offline by means of the materials that are at the party's disposal (Foot & Schneider 2006 : 21- 29).

In order to answer the research question I will take into account the items through which the four practices function (Table 2). Each item which is present will receive the score "1" and each item which is absent will be assigned the score "0". The total will represent the score for each feature and practice/ function.

Table 2. The analysis of the political party websites
(adapted from Gibson & Ward, 2000; Foot & Schneider, 2006; Schweitzer, 2011)

Function	Feature	Score			
		PSD/ SDP	**PNL/ NLP**	**PDL/ DLP**	**UDMR/ DUHG**
Informing (descendent communication)	Information of public interest about :				
	Political system	1	1	0	0
	Election procedures	1	1	1	1
	Information about the organization :				
	Party history	1	1	0	1
	Party hierarchy	1	1	1	1
	Party leaders	1	1	1	1
	Party congresses/ conventions	1	1	0	1
	Party youth organizations	1	1	0	1
	Foudations/ projects	1	1	1	1
	Target-public	1	1	1	1
	Party documents	1	1	1	1
	Mass-media coverage /party news	1	1	1	1
	Future event calendar	0	0	0	0
	Public policies promoted by the party	1	1	1	1
	Party standpoints	1	1	1	1
	News and press releases	1	1	1	1
	Archive (text, photo, audio, video) & newsletter archive	1	1	1	1
	Election campaign news	1	1	1	1
	Total	16	16	12	15
Connecting (lateral communication)	Links to affiliated websites:				
	Links to members' websites	0	0	0	0
	Links to top candidates' websites	1	1	0	0
	Links to county political organizations' websites	1	1	1	1
	Links to party specialized departments	1	1	1	1
	Links to affiliated organizations	1	1	1	1
	Links to external websites:				
	Links to governmental websites	0	0	0	0
	Links to civil society groups	0	0	0	1
	Links to similar European parties	1	1	0	1
	Links to the opponent party's website	0	0	0	0
	Links to international organizations	0	0	0	0
	Links to NGOs	0	0	0	0
	Links to educational institutions	0	0	0	0
	Links to religious organizations	0	0	0	0
	Links to media organization's websites	0	0	1	0
	Links to citizens' websites	0	0	0	0
	Commerical links	0	0	0	0
	Links to search engines	0	0	0	0
	Total	5	4	4	5

Mobilizing (interactive communication)	Downloading promotional election campaign materials	0	0	0	0
	The virtual shop on the website	0	0	0	0
	Resource production:				
	online donation & fundraising	0	1	0	0
	Party online membership	1	1	1	1
	e-volunteering	1	1	1	1
	Political action mobilizing :				
	To convince your friends to sustain the party	1	0	0	0
	Online petitions	1	0	0	0
	e-cards	0	0	0	0
	Sending letters to the website editors	1	1	0	1
	Political entertainment : simulation, tests	0	0	0	0
	Nonpolitical entertainment : games	0	0	0	0
	Total	5	4	2	3
Involving/ Participating (ascendant communication)	Information about the donations for the party	0	1	0	0
	Contact information, others than the email	1	1	1	1
	E-mail addresses	1	1	1	1
	Joining the e-mail discussion lists	0	0	0	0
	Campaign event photos	1	1	1	1
	Online political discussion forums	1	1	1	1
	Campaign calendar	0	0	0	0
	The website visitors' comments	1	1	1	1
	Online polls	1	1	0	1
	Online events	1	0	0	0
	Guest book	0	0	0	0
	Wiki	0	0	0	0
	Weblog	1	1	1	1
	Twitter	1	1	1	1
	Socializing websites	1	1	1	1
	Chat room	0	0	0	0
	Total	10	10	8	7

As it can be observed, the most used function of the Romanian parliamentary websites is the informing function. All the four parties mostly invest in the informing function of their website, in the top-down communication in their relation with their visitors-voters. The informing practice of the political website has greatly improved since 2000, a normal thing if we take into account the expansion of the internet in Romania and the presence of all the political parties in the virtual environment. The Romanian political parties mostly use the website to inform the citizens and the mass-media representatives. Both the citizens and the journalists can observe the networks which have the party as a central node, this being the starting point from where links are made to European parliament members and similar European parties, to party departments, to county, youth and woman's party organizations. In all four cases, the connection with networks such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn is well established, a fact which shows that the parties promote themselves on the socializing networks which are most popular among Romanian internet users. Unfortunately the party websites are not connected with websites of educational, media and religious institutions, of civil society and opponent parties.

It is surprising that the mobilizing function is minimally used although the year 2012 is the year of local and parliamentary elections in Romania and the websites have been

studied not only during the pre-election period, but also before this period (Pătruț 2012 : 146). The involvement of the visitors has improved since 2000 and it is achieved only by inviting visitors to see the photos and videos organized by parties, to answer some online questions, to read and comment on the most representative politicians' blogs or to follow the parties' activity on the socializing websites.

Conclusions

The Romanian political party websites have greatly developed in order to inform, to catch the visitors' attention, to quickly provide critical answers to political opponents. At the same time an increase of technical sophistication of these websites can also be observed. But the features which provide the connecting, mobilizing and involving of visitors have not undergone the same development rhythm, actually the innovating potential of the internet has not been exploited at its full capacity. Not only the web campaigns of the Romanian parties but also those of the European ones show that there is still "an innovation gap" to the American model (Russmann 2010). Most communication from political websites is still one-way in nature than two-way interactive, rather following a top-down than a bottom-up information strategy.

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