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Introduction to attention-based politics¹

Abstract: This study introduces a new tendency in political communication that starts from the politicians' use of Twitter and Facebook. Representatives have to realize that they are in an environment where celebrities can attract, maximize, and direct the attention of followers. Politicians will do just the same. The communication techniques used set the focus of analysis on attention-based politics. The most visible part of Donald Trump's election campaign will be used as an example, in order to demonstrate this speciality of political communication. The main findings of the study support the idea that the new ICTs will not revolutionize political communication because what we are seeing is a 'spectacular' development, an adaptation to the information environment, where the process is sometimes faster, at other times slower. This creates the feeling that what has functioned well in political communication in the past few years is now becoming obsolete.

Key words: political communication, attention-based politics, Donald Trump, US presidential election, populism

Introduction

This study introduces how politicians try to attract, maximize, and direct the attention of followers and journalists. The communication techniques used set the focus of analysis on attention-based politics and the phenomena around it (network logic, self-mediatization, popularization and populist political communication). One of the recent phenomena of this style is Donald Trump, who used his billionaire-celebrity status, as well as the weaknesses of the American presidential primary system and democratic processes, to take advantage and to forge political capital for himself. As a case study, Trump's US presidential campaign is used in this study to support the idea that the new ICTs will not revolutionize political communication because what we are seeing is a 'spectacular' development, an adaptation to the information environment, where the process is sometimes faster, at other times slower. This leads to the feeling that what has functioned well in political communication in the past few years is now becoming obsolete. To prove this, and to show the importance of attention in political communication, as a starting point, it is important to investigate the phenomenon of attention in psychology and related social sciences.

Attention in the social sciences

According to an early conception, attention is familiar to everyone. The phenomenon is a clear and vivid form possessed by the mind, chosen from several options, objects

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or lines of thought present simultaneously. What matters is the point of view based on subjective experience (focalization), concentration and consciousness. This also means that the person disregards certain things in order to be able to handle the rest of them effectively. Attention is the opposite of a confused, dazed, scatter-brained or agitated state (James, 1891, pp. 403–404). The phenomenon encompasses consciousness, but what is in the center of attention can be influenced. The reasons for this are that attention is not always and without exception the gatekeeper of perception and knowledge (Mack, Clarke, 2012, p. 303), sometimes humans process information automatically (Cherry, 1953). Furthermore, attention is limited, humans can only pay attention to a very small number of things at the same time (see: Simons, Rensink, 2005), and unconscious or unintentional processes are at play in the meantime, which also affects the visual form of attention (Lamme, 2003). Finally, internal stimuli can also affect attention in the same way as external influences can direct it.

Based on the above, we can conclude that one of the most important features of attention is simultaneity. Kurt Lewin thought that simultaneity is a phenomenon that can be grasped in present time and space determined by the past and the future (Lewin, 1936, pp. 33–36). Thus attention is a resource limited by time and space. From the individual's point of view, it cannot be seen as an orienting process, instead, it is characterized by arousal, as Colin Cherry concluded in his research on the cocktail party phenomenon (1953).

However, the introduction of attention to economic studies is important to see that we are living in an 'information overload' society where the last currency we own is our attention. Basically the popularity of a particular company or brand depends on the reach attention of the consumers. This would mean that, after the primacy of land, tools and information, we are living in a society where attention is most precious 'possession'. The main problem with attention is that it is limited, which makes it even more important (see: Davenport, Beck, 2001; Lanham, 2006). Insofar as attention is limited by time and space, the concept can also be meaningful in the interpretation of political processes.

In the present study I distinguish political attention from attention-based politics, and I demonstrate and present a justification for the latter through citing several examples from Donald Trump's US presidential campaign, mainly from his use of Twitter. I argue that Trump himself has become a meme in social media, which he could use to his advantage in grasping and maximizing the attention of the audience (voters).

Political attention

Political attention is about political agendas, that is, the way in which a topic reaches the attention of decision makers (policy agenda) and opinion influencers (media agenda), the way it becomes understandable and important to public opinion (public agenda), and the way decisions are made based on all this. The answer is given by the model of agenda setting (McCombs, Shaw, 1972). Among all the above, the policy agenda will be in the center of political attention, which implies that the attention of decision makers is finite, while numerous topics and issues are raised in the agenda of politics (John, Jennings, 2010, p. 564). Which topics will receive attention from officials in the limited world of

administration will become an important question (John, Jennings, 2010, pp. 563–564; Kingdon, 1984, p. 3).

Naturally, politicians can influence what comes to the focus of attention. Typical examples are political speeches, which have the function of directing attention in decision making (Hobolt, Klemmensen, 2008). However, we should not forget that information processing by decision makers is unbalanced, that is, it is episodic rather than continuous (sometimes the decisions will come slower, while at other times decisions will be made rapidly). It often stalls, and explosive activities hoist it out from stagnation. In this respect, it is no different from information processing in other organizations outside the realm of politics. Governments and organizations, just like individuals, have a limited capacity for concentration. The only method for addressing this phenomenon is to disregard events taking place around them simultaneously, and instead focus on running their attention quickly through the different currents of information affecting them. In the meantime, the government needs to set an action sequence which will affect the administration of topics and eventually their inclusion on the agenda. This situation can be improved in the world of politics by the division of powers (government, president, parliament, the judiciary). As a result, different actors can respond to different areas of political agendas in a specialized way (Jones, Baumgartner, 2005, pp. 20–21). Thus, in the world of politics the issue of political attention can address the making of specific decisions, and perhaps the behavior of decision makers (John, Jennings, 2010, p. 564). The phenomenon is further nuanced by the conflicts of party politics, which exert their effects in the short term.

Another thing we should remember is that policy agendas can also be effectively influenced by the media as well as the public. These actors will be important, but with regard to the literature on political attention, they can only be seen as playing a secondary role, as they can only have an effect on decisions and cannot make them. Referenda and elections are exceptions to this, the role of the public has increased value at these times, and political actors become influencers. Such events rarely entail specialized policy decisions (laws, decrees, etc.). Thus, the sources, directions and consequences of attention (or inclusion on the agenda) are analyzed along the lines of agenda setting (see: Kiouisis, McCombs, 2004; Lopez-Escobar, Llamas, McCombs, Rey, 1998), but researchers rarely analyze the communicative characteristics of attention, and if they do, they stay within the scope of the literature of agenda (see: Hopmann, Elmelund-Præstekær, Vliegenthart, de Vreese, 2012). Based on all this, attention is barely different from thoroughly crafted thematization techniques. However, we do not find an answer to how political actors can direct attention to themselves or to their themes. Therefore the fight for attention during the communication of political actors holds some unanswered questions.

Attention-based politics

As opposed to political attention, the concept of attention-based politics means something different. While it bears a lot of similarity to agenda setting, it does not refer to the effect of political attention on decision making, or to the consequences of attention, or inclusion on the agenda. Writings in political sciences dealing with attention cover the

means by which 'users' make the wider public concerned with topics. Attention-based politics addresses the issue in a different way. It takes political actors to be communicators, who have to reach voters in competition with other, non-political actors (e.g. celebrities). Attention-based politics emphasizes this particularly communicative character of political participation (thus referring neither to the activist nor to the regulative aspects).

Political communication did not undergo a revolution with the emergence of new information and communication technologies, instead, politicians acquired a new tool that they can use during their everyday communications (Römmele, 2003; Wright, 2011). This process has culminated in the spectacularization of online political communication.

The Trump phenomenon

Based on the above, we can conclude that attention has always been part of politics. Attention-based politics refers to the situation where the nature of the struggle for the attention of voters changes. It starts at the point where a vast amount of information reaches ordinary people through different forums and in different ways. This information can be about celebrities, the entertainment industry in general, remote and nearby events, terrorism, sports, politics, etc. Only a small amount of this information can grab and hold people's attention. In this communicative situation, politicians not only compete for attention with other politicians or parties, but also with other actors. In this sense, politicians compete for people's attention with the Kardashians, Olympic athletes, Apple products, Brexit, ISIS, etc.

With the fragmentation of the public, more precisely its multilayered character (Dahlberg, 2007; Dahlgren, 2005), politicians also face challenges in grabbing attention. These challenges raise questions like what counts as mainstream media and what does not? How can social groups uninterested in politics be reached? By what segmentation can the widest audience be addressed (their attention grabbed) with the least financial investment?

Different answers have been given and are still given to the above questions in the practice of political communication. A typical, and also conspicuous example is connected to the campaign of American presidential candidate Donald Trump. The appearance of the billionaire businessman and reality show participant as an aspiring presidential candidate of the Republican Party was not taken seriously by his fellow politicians, journalists and even a lot of the voters. Trump's campaign contained a mix of centrist elements (e.g. ones related to the LGBT community) and statements filled with hate (e.g. against immigrants). However, his communication was very sharp, and his populist statements helped him win over not only the centrist candidates of the Republican Party, but also those who are considered ultra conservative (see: Eiermann, 2016, p. 34). Trump created a communicative environment where it was impossible not to talk about him (McAllister, 2016, p. 1190). What the candidate did was, in fact, the speeding up of his communication. He made statements at his political meetings on a daily basis which he knew the traditional media would deal with, and on social media (typically on Twitter) he made statements in a coarse style about the party and media elite, opponents in the

Democratic Party, know-it-alls, basically anyone that he considered to be standing in his way towards winning the official candidacy, all of whom he presented as corrupt, sorry figures who had lost all credit. He realized that the operation of the parties, the primary system, and the media could not keep pace with the explosion of communication that took place over past decades. Democratic processes take time, and the controlling and critical functions of the media, opposing candidates and eventually the voters could not fulfill the roles expected from them in democracies, as Trump's communication was working at a much higher rate (Lepore, 2016). By the calculations of the New York Times based on data from the mediaQuant and SMG Delta companies from February 2016, this tactic provided the candidate with media presence worth 1.9 billion dollars for free, while he purchased media appearances for 10 million dollars. By comparison, the Democratic Party candidate Hillary Clinton spent 28 million and got free presence worth 746 million (Confessore, Yourish, 2016). The attention gained in this way made Donald Trump the presidential candidate of the Republican Party and then President of the United States.

The campaign of presidential candidate Donald Trump was built around his own communications. The candidate himself turned into a digital element whose message or standpoint was consciously created with a view to the environment (political atmosphere) and with who was suitable for being shared. In this way, Trump's Internet presence matches Limor Shifman's definition of Internet memes (Shifman, 2014, p. 41). The issue here is not the kinds of visual and textual responses to his campaign from voters or from opponents, but the way the candidate rode the wave of memes in order for the media to be preoccupied with him. As a result, Trump's Twitter account comes to the fore, and this is handled by the candidate himself (Holmes, 2016). In order of popularity, the messages sent on the Internet were the ones related to policies (public policy), the ones against Republican party opponent candidates, the ones about public opinion polls, the ones against Democratic party candidates, and the ones against women (except for Hillary Clinton, as she belongs to the former category) (for more details, see: Libresco, 2016). Naturally, the emphasis is continuously shifting, for example, Clinton appears more frequently and Republican party opponents appear significantly less frequently in tweets after winning the candidacy. The persons appearing in the messages typically do not appear in a positive light, and their names are often included in attributive combinations – dismissing political correctness: “Low energy Jeb Bush,” “Lyin’ Ted Cruz.” “Crooked Hillary Clinton.” For instance, “Low energy Jeb Bush just endorsed a man he truly hates, Lyin’ Ted Cruz. Honestly, I can’t blame Jeb in that I drove him into oblivion!” (Trump, 2016a), or “Bernie Sanders endorsing Crooked Hillary Clinton is like Occupy Wall Street endorsing Goldman Sachs” (Trump, 2016f). We find a similar situation around the use of the words “desperate,” “(so) unfair,” “disgrace(ful),” “(so) dishonest,” etc., which Trump used frequently in posts about different topics. Such posts include: “Shows how weak and desperate Lyin’ Ted is when he has to team up with a guy who openly can’t stand him and is only 1 win and 38 losses” (Trump, 2016c); “NOOOO! @CNN is so unfair to me!! They called Lyin’ Ted the winner! DISASTER! Expect a lawsuit, @CNN! #WIPrimary” (Trump, 2016b); “The ‘dirty’ poll done by @ABC @washingtonpost is a disgrace. Even they admit that many more Democrats were polled. Other polls were good” (Trump, 2016d); “The media is so dishonest. If I make

a statement, they twist it and turn it to make it sound bad or foolish. They think the public is stupid!” (Trump, 2016e). The use of such attributes guaranteed him to be referenced by journalists and followers. However, the adjective used was more interesting than the message itself, which fitted right into Trump’s tactic (McAllister, 2016, p. 1190).

It is also worth highlighting the use of exclamation points in Trump’s tweets. While Trump used this punctuation mark in more than 70% of his messages, sometimes several at a time, in Clinton’s case this proportion was below 10% (Libresco, 2016). Thus, Trump’s tweets were different from the posts we are used to from politicians, not just in the use of the attributives, but also in the punctuation marks, which also contributes to calling attention to himself. Eventually, in this campaign, it was the candidate himself who mattered, and the content of what he was saying was less important.

Trump’s messages tended to create their own lives, just like memes, and typify the presidential candidate. Actually, the Republican presidential candidate did nothing other than use the last currency of social network users: the attention. He directed attention to himself in a particular way, he maximized and directed it in a way that supported the result favorable to him. Based on the above, we can conclude that *attention-based politics describes the process in which politicians use their communication to draw the attention of the biggest possible crowd of the audience (voters) to themselves or to the themes they propose in the multitude of information or news flows*. In the meantime, this attention should not be confused with agenda setting, as it is not about policies but about the politicians, or the manifestations of political questions by politicians.

What processes are Trump’s Twitter communications built on?

Methods for drawing, maximizing and directing attention may vary. In the case of Trump’s Twitter messages, these are expressed through behaviorally based memes, which have a participation structure (a layer that supports emotional involvement and participative action), personal code (a unique communication style) and communicative (message transfer) function (see: Shifman, 2014, pp. 38–39, 40–41). Everything depends on the intensity with which the communicator uses the phenomena that support the process. In Trump’s campaign the exploitation of the following phenomena can be discovered: network logic, self-mediatization, popular politics and populist political communication.

Network logic

The theory of network logic is a direct outcome of the theory of media logic. Media logic describes the process where the media transfer and communicate information (Altheide, 1985; 2006; Altheide, Snow, 1979; 1988). In political communication, this same process refers to the use of media by political actors, that is, acquiring the regularities of the message transfer and communication functions of media and communicating using these.

By comparison, communication defined by political logic does not regard the regularities of the media (Brants, van Praag, 2006; Schrott, 2009; Strömbäck, 2008). Media logic used in political communication became obvious through the description of

the techniques used during the Italian elections of 1983, where politicians accepted the regularities of mediatized behavior, so the media (especially television) would be preoccupied with them (Mazzoleni, 1987, pp. 101–102). Network logic, on the other hand, takes into account the characteristics and workings found in the Internet era. Its starting point is that social media differ from traditional media. Content production, distribution and media use are organized by different principles in network logic than in media logic (Klinger, Svensson, 2015, pp. 1247–1251). Yet the transition between the two kinds of logic does not constitute the same kind of paradigm shift as that between party logic and media logic. New communication forums (blogs, microblogs, social sites, etc.) appear alongside the old ones, which also include communication in the traditional, increasingly polarized media (see: Szabó, Bene, 2015). Network logic often complements communication through traditional media, but it definitely entails the adaptation of communicators to the new technology (Bennett, Segerberg, 2013; van Dijck, Poell, 2013). This adaptation means that the communicator himself will be responsible for researching, writing and sharing the content, and editors (gatekeepers) cannot be expected to implement this process. Communication will be characterized as subjective (issue-driven), in Trump's case strongly subjective, for even the selection of topics will reflect the personal interest or interest-driven taste of the communicator (Merkovity, 2016, p. 116). Finally, network logic is also manifested in the method by which the communicator desires to achieve attention directed to himself, which results in self-mediatization.

Self-mediatization

The concepts of media logic, mediatization (and mediation) are sometimes blurred in the literature on political communication (Hepp, 2011; Livingstone, 2009). Regardless of the contradictions found in the literature, the concepts refer to two distinct phenomena in this paper, which nonetheless have similar effects. Media logic – in the manner described above – refers to adaptation to the workings of the media, while mediatization refers to a political system that is largely affected by the media and is adjusted to the broadcasts of the media about politics (Asp, 1986, p. 359, quoted by Hjavard, 2008, p. 106). Others go as far as to claim that politics has lost its autonomy in the face of the media through mediatization, as it communicates to the audience according to the regularities of the media (Mazzoleni, Schulz, 1999). Still others consider the patterns of online communication to be determined by traditional media (Mátyus, 2010). In this communication, the influence of traditional media plays an important role. However, the situation is different on social sites, where different regularities prevail. Political actors are not only mediatized through the media, but they will also feel the need to attract the attention of their audience efficiently. This is how self-mediatization or reflexive mediatization becomes part of the picture (Marcinkowski, Steiner, 2009; Meyer, 2002): this is the process whereby political actors get traditional media to react to their own communication, in the way Trump did in his campaign.

In the process of self-mediatization, the emphasis stays on politicians drawing the attention of traditional media, but when applied in social media, this inevitably also turns into a fight for grabbing, as well as keeping up the attention of followers. Political actors

arrange the scene of communication through self-mediatization (Esser, 2013, p. 162), which they hope will help them transfer their messages in a climate that is favorable for them. This also means that politicians disregard the interactive nature of social sites, and instead they regard the unidirectional communication of traditional media to characterize social media as well (see: Aharony, 2012).

Popular politics

Among the consequences of self-mediatization, we should mention the changing character of the communication of political actors (which Jay Blumler discusses in more detail, see: Blumler, 2014, pp. 34–37). However, it is important to note that other processes that had been present previously are also amplified as a result of self-mediatization. One of these is spectacularization (Mazzoleni, 2008), which means that the world of politics is reduced to spectacle through media logic and mediatization, but in the same manner, network logic and self mediatization also reinforce this process, with elements of content becoming less important, and in such an environment it is the mediagenic politicians who will be able to direct attention to themselves.

The popularization of politics represents the process of directing attention, and its literature takes as its starting point the consideration that politics is ‘not popular’ in contemporary societies (Hay, 2007). The image of politicians struggling for popularity is not new, in 1987 Neil Postman wrote, in connection with politicians of the western world, that political actors may appear anywhere and can do anything without it seeming strange, arrogant or inappropriate in any other way. This means that following the general culture of television, politicians have become celebrities (Postman, 1987, p. 135). In the competition driven by the attitude of popularity, of being attended to, politicians exploit the fact that the media deals with them more than average, and so they can show what they think will draw the attention of the audience in the long term. The end result of popular politics is the ‘celebrity politician’, who (a) had already been a celebrity before and uses this when building his political career (see the careers of Ronald Reagan, Donald Trump, or Beppe Grillo in Europe), or (b) is a politician who appears with other celebrities to popularize himself (see the political career of Barack Obama). In both cases, the elements of popular culture appear in the political arena (Street, 2004, pp. 437–438). However, we must note that on the other side of popular politics are the non-political celebrities who sometimes have political manifestations (e.g. Bono, Angelina Jolie, Bob Geldof, etc. See: Street, 2004). Thus popular politics uses the traits of popular culture for drawing attention, so as to gain as many followers as possible (attention maximization).

Populist political communication

Popular politics partially overlaps with populist political communication, which aims to mobilize a new, or at least a larger mass of voters. As an ideology, populism does not belong among the great ideologies covering all areas of life in the political sciences (e.g. conservatism, liberalism, socialism). It can be defined as a set of ideas that address the

way the individual should relate to certain issues (to 'foreigners', to the elite, to the nation, etc.). Here populism will be referred to as a communication style. In populism, interpreted as a style, this is the way in which politicians express their closeness to people in their speeches, while they use symbols (e.g. dressing or language use) to transfer the message of being 'one of them', that is, 'not a member of the elite' (Jagers, Walgrave, 2007, p. 322). When the process is placed in the online space, "[...] in the meantime, the creation of media texts is also an opportunity for the manifestation of self-expressions, of linkage to group cultures (subcultures), and the creation of collective identity" (Mátyus, 2012, p. 387). Thus populist politics may not only originate from parties and their leaders whom we call populist (see: Mudde, 2013).

Populist parties were typically neglected actors in the national media. The so-called *cordon sanitaire* in mainstream media drove these politicians to look for alternative routes for communication, through which they could reach potential voters. Several empirical studies describe this process (e.g. Bos, van der Brug, de Vreese, 2010; Koopmans, Muis, 2009; Vliegthart, 2012). To sum these up briefly, populist politicians needed to call attention to themselves, then they had to maximize attention, in order to break through the resistance of traditional media at a given point. Such politicians are familiar with the workings of social media and know how attention can be sustained. They acquired these techniques during political agitation, gaining an advantage over politicians who registered on social sites because of the challenge of social media (and populism). As a celebrity, Donald Trump was profoundly familiar with these techniques, so he had an edge over the other challengers. In sum, populist political communication reflects on the inner (political) challenges of the fight for attention.

Conclusion

Donald Trump's use of Twitter is different from the posts we are used to from politicians on social sites (see: Merkovity, 2016) and it matches the main characteristics of memes. It transfers cultural phenomena mostly in textual form and it also has humorous characteristics. The cultural phenomena shared by him as a candidate are mostly related to politics, but breaking with political correctness, he writes divisive tweets, and several of them a day (Eiermann, 2016; McAllister, 2016). Traditionally, politicians (and journalists) are not ready for any of their manifestations to turn into a meme (Zittrain, 2014, p. 393). Donald Trump, on the other hand, was betting on just that. His posts were shared by thousands and tens of thousands by his followers, and these posts often also appeared in the broadcast media. Trump followed a unique path of attention-based politics. He used his billionaire celebrity status to forge political capital. While doing this, he exploited the phenomena of network logic, self-mediatization, popularization and populism known from political communication and the field of communication and media science. Naturally, the weakness of the American primary system was also necessary for the success of Trump's tactic. An important question from the point of view of research is, which elements and how much of Trump's style will be adopted by politicians in the mainstream. Another question will be related to other manifestations of attention-based politics that can be studied in political communication.

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Wprowadzenie do polityki opartej na uwadze

Streszczenie

W badaniu przedstawiono nowy trend komunikacji politycznej, zapoczątkowany przez polityków korzystających z Twittera i Facebooka. Przedstawiciele tego trendu muszą zdać sobie sprawę, że funkcjonują w środowisku, w którym celebryci mogą przyciągać, maksymalizować i kierować uwagę obserwatorów. To samo dotyczy również polityków. Zastosowane techniki komunikacyjne stanowią główny przedmiot analizy polityki opartej na przyciąganiu uwagi (attention-based politics). Posługując się przykładem najbardziej widocznej części kampanii wyborczej Donalda Trumpa przedstawiono wyjątkowy charakter tego rodzaju komunikacji politycznej. Główne wnioski z badania potwierdzają pogląd, że nowe technologie informacyjno-komunikacyjne nie zrewolucjonizują komunikacji politycznej, ponieważ widzimy jedynie – czasem szybszy, innym razem wolniejszy – „spektakularny” rozwój i adaptację do środowiska informacyjnego. Stwarza to poczucie, że to, co dobrze funkcjonowało w komunikacji politycznej w ciągu ostatnich kilku lat, staje się przestarzałe.

Słowa kluczowe: komunikacja polityczna, polityka skoncentrowana na przyciąganiu uwagi, Donald Trump, wybory prezydenckie w USA, populizm

