CHAPTER 9

SOCIAL MEDIA INNOVATION IN POLITICAL COMMUNICATION: ALTERNATIVE OR MAINSTREAM?

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Abstract
Discourses on the new ICTs and political communication can be traced not only in political sciences and communication research. It is a recent development that beyond many other fields, internet studies, cultural anthropology and democracy research in general are also discussing. Therefore, it is necessary to have a summary of political communication research in a broader sense, in which one can analyse the results of these 'neighbouring' fields in a comparative way. According to the literature, the topic has not been discussed in such detail as of yet. We will analyze this topic in the chapter trough our main question 'is the social media still alternative or is it mainstream channel for political communication?'
According to our expectations the new ICTs will not revolutionize political communication, what we see is a 'spectacular' development, adaption to the information environment, which process is once faster, other times slower. This makes one feel that what has been well-functioning in political communication in the past few years is now becoming obsolete. The comparative analysis of Australian and Hungarian MPs' use of Facebook will answer or question from the title.

9.1. Introduction

To date, a majority of research around social networking is based on youth and how young people interact with new technologies. There is a strong sub-text of 'marketing' and business-oriented approaches that include research around 'choice' and how people develop choices around their interactions with social media. This is mostly superficial 'cause-effect' research and while it is used regularly for marketing purposes by companies around the world, social scientists are becoming increasingly wary of the numbers produced by these sorts of surveys and data-mining tools. The research for the most part is based on what 'consumers' of technology seek to use to further facilitate the convenience and/or ease of their lives. Here we are measuring something entirely new in terms of examining how this technology changes (or not) political communication. This sort of

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political engagement, the communicative aspect in particular (neither the activist nor the policy aspect), in which representatives engage in delivering and receiving messages from constituents (multipoint-to-multipoint communication). We examine the literature of 'old' media in order to see changes of the new media landscape in the next two sections of the chapter. We understand new media as a tool for social engagement of the electorate in political communication, therefore the terms 'social media' and 'new media' are considered to be synonyms. Following the literature review we introduce findings from our empirical research of Australian and Hungarian members of the parliaments' (MPs') use of Facebook social networking site. In the final part of the chapter we argue that the social media is still an alternative media for the world of politics.

9.2. Manipulated 'Old' Media

Politicians' role in the environment of old media is a well-known phenomenon. (1) They lead stories in political, sometimes the tabloid news. (2) They are in constant competition with newsmakers to have the best place in news feeds. (3) Also, they are in protracted conflict with other politicians to make dominant their point of view in news feeds. And finally, (4) politicians are continuously trying to set their own agendas. The first three elements aid politicians to construct the news for the audience, while the fourth aims to help in perceiving the information. In this sense the media is not only the channel, their formats could provide the grammar, syntax and stylistic considerations for media competence and for the public [3] [4]. Meanwhile, the media system has its own effect on political actors. The politics are more spectacular and more personalized than it was nearly 50 years ago. 'Horse-race politics' or 'video-clip politics' [1] [6]are the main organizing element of the news about the political scene. The arguments are shorter and more compact, the visual components come to the forefront, while sound bites are essential, and they determine the political happenings for the public. As such political actors appear to have 'cracked the code' of media. Using this knowledge of media logic, politicians are able to place their news and comments on the most effective part of the media industry. This phenomenon has the result of making political actors look like 'media jugglers' who can manipulate journalists and editors and even appear to be 'tricking' news media whenever they want.

The political communication techniques are quite similar on old and new media, the logic behind politicians' use of new media is quite different. According to Manovich, two cultural expressions can be distinct in comparing old and new media: the narrative and the database [23]. The narrative is chronological. It must have a well-defined context and audience. If the politician does the homework, clearly defines the context and the audience, then s/he will be able to successfully persuade or manipulate its voters. In the new media, the database is hierarchical, and politicians need to have a totally different approach from the old media. "The database organizes and presents data according to a preset value structure and algorithm" [22]. These features generate different landscape than it was in old media and the representatives need to define themselves in this newscene.

9.3. New Media Landscape

New media has changed a previously well-known landscape. The new communication technologies affect the relationship between the actors of political communication. While in the past there was a hierarchy between the different actors, where the political system, media system, citizens/voters order could be set up, today's political system opening towards the citizens and the new networking techniques of civilians has brought the two actors to almost the same level as that of the media.

The starting point for this section is that political communication can be connected with the emergence of mass democracy and mass communication, and here we further assert that new communication technologies lead to the democratization of the practice of political communication [19] [26]. These changes have taken place without any revolutionary change in the hallmarks of societies that forced the political system to give up its original role. Under ideal conditions, if we assume high and predictable economic and cultural development, for the change of political communication it is not necessary to change the socio-political arrangements, it is enough if the technologies are changing, which are specifically affecting the daily lives of people [11]. It should be noted that the previous claim is only theoretical, and it is true only under ideal conditions. The practice is somewhat inconsistent with the theory, often accompanied by changes in socio-political factors, as well.

Where can we find these changes? Five general trends could be found, which express the change of political communication actors: decentralization (reminding us that the commonly expressed "there is no political campaign without media campaign" thesis seems to be disproved), openness (the statement that communication is created by the political system, where the media mediates between a political institution, the state and the citizens, is plainly incorrect), mobilization (plays an important role in efficiency), pro-am's (the appearance of civilians who are able to generate professional results themselves and they do not need the help of former professionals), multipoint communication (a small group of citizens/voters also can communicate to a large publicity in such forms of communications) [24]. Altogether, these trends create a database-like network, where the communication and the interconnection work much faster as it worked in the environment of old media. Multiple channels, feedback and conversation are in the middle of this network, where the parties and politicians do not differ from movie stars, musicians or internet celebrities.

The new technology has a greater impact on stakeholders, different than the media. The mediums are converging with each other, which leads to a horizontal media. This means that news and events appear in the horizontal media, like newspapers, TV channels and recently mobile phones and all of this is enabled by the internet. In the horizontal media citizens can remix or mash-up the various pieces of information. With this view, we have arrived at the qualitative difference of today's media [9]. The remixed or mashed-up version of the news might be different from what it was originally supposed to mean. Experts of political communication have to be aware of the reality of 'remix' or 'mash-up culture', and they have to adapt to the new challenges they generate. This does not mean the total disappearance of the pre-set agendas, but rather it means that the media system moves closer to citizens. There is no longer a sharp border between the two entities. Citizens are merging with the media system, having taken their first steps to take charge of it. This process, together with information remixes and mash-ups, lead us to a situation where a monopoly on agenda-setting ceases to exist and is replaced by 'agenda melding'. This 'agenda melding' means groups of citizens who organize themselves around certain types of agendas, which may represent ways of seeing things, ways of doing things, or other unique ways of relating to the world. Basically, all groups have agendas of issues, some formal, some more loosely structured [27].

The changes in the communication technologies can also affect the media, but the changes do not have the same direction as in the case of the political actor or the civilians. The role of the media is still important, it still supplies various groups with information, but it does not have the well known genres that we were previously accustomed to.

Citizens expect political parties to have their own web appearance, where different pieces of information are available about the party and its candidates. One of the most important expectations

is probably that the programme of the party is freely available on the website. Yet, it has to be emphasized, that this is only an expectation, and it does not mean that the voters are reading these party programmes. Nowadays, the situation is similar in case of their presence outside the official online channels. People find those parties or candidates more sympathetic, who are representing themselves on social networking sites [7]. In the two countries of Austria and Hungary which we will examine in detail, these sites are Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, yet at the same time, compared to the overall internet penetration, only a small number of users follow the political news. Nevertheless, we can safely say that the political system is gradually being moved to the internet. One can explore a number of different reasons behind politics' partial move to the internet, but one of the most important reasons is that the citizens simply expect them to be there. At the same time, we must not forget that new technologies enable politicians to take up the quick and flexible refilling of news 24 hours a day. With the appearance of the information and communication technologies, political communication has also gone through certain changes. "ICTs make enormous quantities of information available to the public. This change in quantity may result in a change in quality" [30]. This means that large volumes of data have to be under control of parties or politicians to know how to reach out for their voters.

In this landscape, the citizens have a more important role in political communication through the application of new communication technologies. Nowadays, with the help of information networks, civilian networks are able to send immediate reactions to politicians and to economic entities, offices, celebrities, etc. This is also true in the other direction, which means that everybody and everything, from politics to economy and culture, can belong to a network and create interactions with other networks. In the case of the users of new ICTs we can talk about inactive–active networks [24].

With the help of information networks individuals can easily participate in the formation of politics as actively as the media. The way in which users use the networks, determines to which group they will belong to. Active participants (or networks) are internet citizens, also known as 'netizens', who are familiar with the working methods of the social networks within their fields of interest, and in some cases they are also able to manipulate them. Inactive participants (or networks) are, on the other hand, more familiar with the offline sphere, which they can influence better. In the case of inactive participants, social networks are extensions of their offline lives. Thus they use the new technology primarily as a tool which helps them reach their external goals. Besides using them as tools, active participants also have goals within the networks themselves. We have begun learning the forms of online activity only just recently, but it seems that the rules of political communication are changing. There is a greater emphasis on civilians in the new political communication and in the era of new communication technologies.

The role of civilians means political activity in today's political communication, where the activity is online or offline political participation, demonstrations and in the worst case riots (see connection between the social media and the Arab Spring or the latest happenings in Egypt also [21]). The value of these types of communications is that it fits everything, which brings them closer to their 'destination'.

9.4. Research: Australian and Hungarian representatives on the Facebook

This chapter is informed by a portion of research completed on sitting members of parliament (MPs) in a variety of countries. Here, we are selecting two countries as a point of comparison in order to develop our framework for examining the changing dynamics of social media and political

communication. Our justification for a comparison of Australia and Hungary is threefold. First, the authors were living in the respective countries at the time of data collection, and our reasoning was that this was important to keep a 'check' on the day-to-day politics as we are quite close to analysing this on a regular basis. Second, we could then do a 'test case' of two dissimilar countries to see if the data diverged a great deal or if we were getting some anomalous results. With a distinct difference in historical development, paths to democracy, and in quite different regional contexts politically, Australia and Hungary provide an interesting point of comparison in terms of social media usage and here, we can test the assumptions of the difference between countries and examine our primary interest in question of the 'levelling effect' of social media technologies. The third justification for the point of comparison, related to the first two, but taking our assumptions further, is to examine structurally difference countries to see if we get radically different, or indeed radically similar, results. Unicameral and bicameral parliaments, constitutional monarchy vs a post-socialist republic, and several socio-political differences such as GDP wealth, and so on, means that the two countries are structurally different in a myriad of ways. As a result this study should give us a good indication of where future studies and future data will possibly take us.

The following part of the chapter presents Facebook usage of Australian and Hungarian politicians who were elected members of the parliaments' of the two countries in 2012/2013. During the research we were scanning the representatives' posts through three months. We purposely kept ourselves from campaign periods and elections because in these terms the politicians' communications usually intensify towards the voters. We examined ordinary weekdays. The examined period was from November 2012 to January 2013. This period contains legislature, intermission and holidays, too. In this period we were able to observe their post-writing frequency and country specifics.

We could not examine all the members of the two parliaments' because not every MP has Facebook page. This is the reason that politicians in our study were chosen by simple random sampling. We were looking for representatives who are active on Facebook. This criterion means that they post several times a week (at least two-three posts a week).

We took 10 percent of the members of the parliaments. From 226 we analyzed 23 representatives from the Australian Parliament (8 members from the Senate and 15 members from the House of Representatives) and from 386 we studied 39 politicians from the Hungarian National Assembly. The both sample consists prime ministers during the time of the research (Julia Gillard and Viktor Orbán), party leaders and representatives who are members of the government and politicians from the opposition, as well.

The generally known representatives – like party leaders – usually have Facebook profiles but we found some party leaders who have not, for example Antal Rogán who is the leader of the biggest party faction in the Hungarian Parliament, Fidesz, has not got Facebook profile or official page during our research.

During the three months of scanning we examined 4070 posts. The following diagrams represent data in different states and months. From the diagrams the dark lines show that how many posts are published on one day and the lighter lines introduce how many representatives were active on that specific day.

First, we introduce the Australian results (figures 1–3): the 23 Australian representatives shared 1048 posts during the mentioned months. In November 2012 they published 400 posts, in

December over the same year they shared 323 posts and finally, in January 2013 Australian politicians did 325 posts. This means that there are 11.4 posts a day. We can determine from our sample that the not all the representatives post every day. Preferably, they do a post or more posts every other or third day.

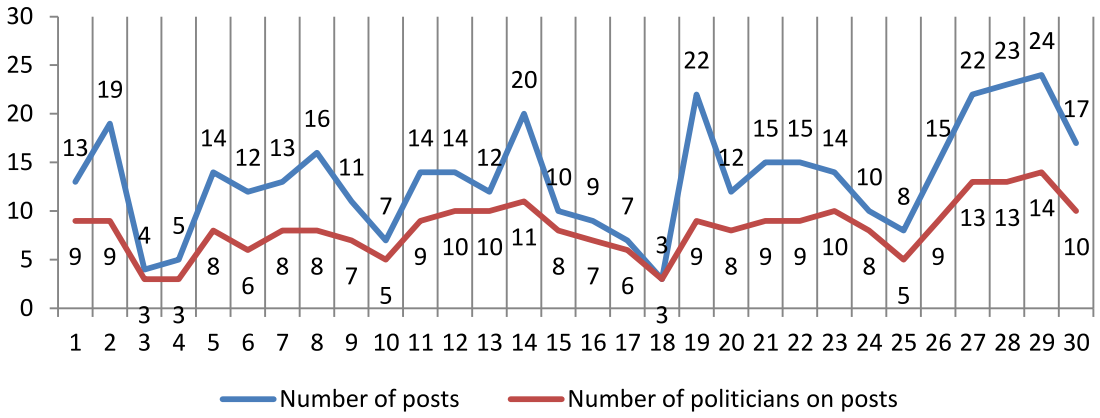

Figure 1. Facebook posts of Australian MPs in November 2012

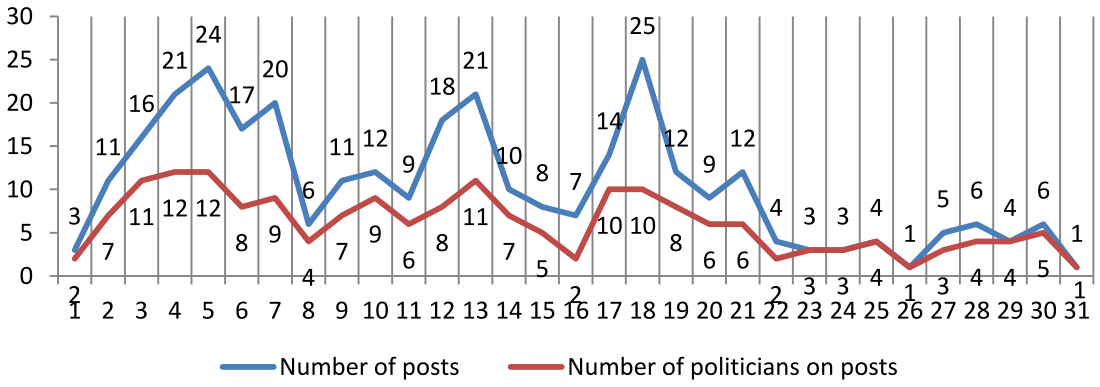

Figure 2. Facebook posts of Australian MPs in December 2012

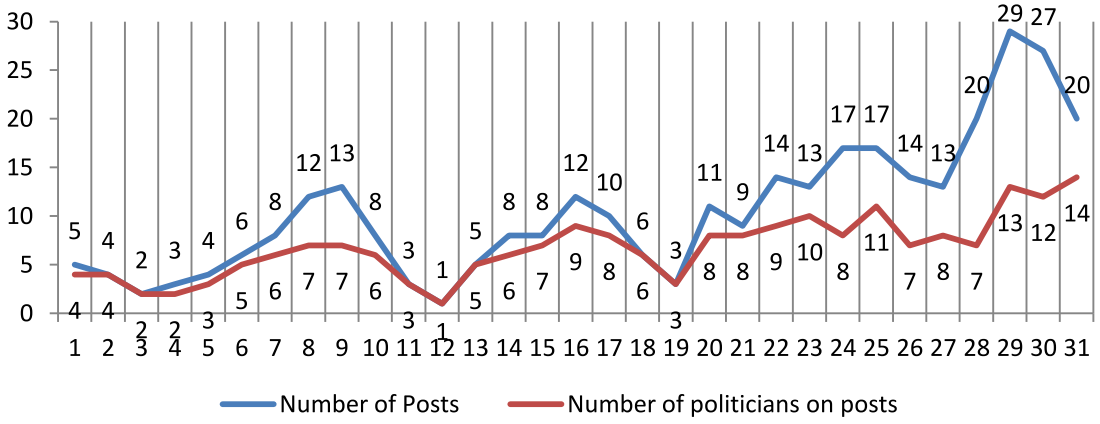

Figure 3. Facebook posts of Australian MPs in January 2013