

THE PERSONAL WEBSITE, BLOGGING AND SOCIAL NETWORKING – MODERN TOOLS OF POLITICAL PROPAGANDA

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Abstract

The present article analyses the way in which politicians adapt to the IT – centered era, by shifting their communication resources towards the virtual world. Since the internet is rapidly gaining ground as far as communication of all kinds is concerned, political actors have also turned to this generous channel in order to get their message across to potential voters, especially young ones. Thus, they all have an official website, a blog and a profile on most major social networking sites, all used to publicise themselves and their political programme.

Key words: politician, website, blog, social networking.

Introductory remarks

We now live in an IT centered era in which the old means of communication are gradually losing importance, or acquiring new dimensions, so as to cope with the increasing challenges of the 21st century. Thus, according to specialists, the next big thing in politics and in political communication is represented by social networking sites, blogging and the creation of personal web pages. All of these are seen as applications which will best help politicians connect with potential voters in future elections. Network technologies are also increasingly used in public and political debates and communications¹.

¹ Brian D. Loader (ed.), *The Governance of Cyberspace – Politics, Technology and Global Restructuring*, Routledge, London and New York, 2005, p. 111.

Social sites, blogs and webpages – means of influencing public opinion

Thus, social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, MySpace, Netlog represent an outcome of the “consumer-created media”² and enable users to engage in person-to-person interaction. These sites make old communication channels such as the TV, newspapers and personal letters appear as obsolete, especially when it comes to younger voters. The growing number of internet addicts cannot be ignored. Politicians who pay no attention to the impact of these new forms of communication risk losing an important number of voters, as well as public awareness as to their most important projects. “Internet communication has made possible new forms of political organisation and interaction”³.

On the other hand, a “blog” (the term represents a contraction of the term weblog or, in semantic terms, *compounding* – web log – followed by *foreclipping* – blog) is “a type of website, usually maintained by an individual with regular entries or commentary, description of events, or other materials such as graphics or video.”⁴ These entries are usually displayed in reverse-chronological order, and they represent the “message” the author wants to convey to the world.

Apart from the fact that it is trendy to keep a blog, blogging has become an important form of communication with others. In politics, it is a way for a political actor to show involvement in the lives of others, to openly express what makes him different from the others, and to keep track of people’s reactions to his message. Apart from serving as a useful propaganda tool and as a means to promote oneself, the importance of feedback cannot be neglected. Monitoring reactions to one’s message may prove as useful as conveying the message itself. Reactions both from supporters and from opponents have to be taken into account.

One advantage that blogging has over the personal webpage of a politician springs from the fact that a blog is perceived as much more informal. Accessing a blog and reading a candidate’s entries adds a personal touch to the process. The official webpage is perceived as formal, posh, while a blog is seen as informal, personal, therefore more honest, also creating a “bond” between emitter and recipient of the message.

² <http://www.infoworld.com/t/architecture/social-networking-sites-next-big-thing-in-politics-307>

³ Steve Buckler and David Dolowitz, *Politics on the Internet – a Student Guide*, Routledge, London and New York, 2005.

⁴ <http://pagerankandalexa.com/content/why-anyone-needs-blog>

Last but not least, the personal web-page appears to be the most formal of the three. We could rightly assume that someone looking for information on a given politician would start by visiting his personal website in order to find out official data. The next step would be to read the person's blog and finally, if there is similarity of ideas and opinions, a direct contact could be established via a social networking site.

The one thing that these three forms of communication have in common, is the illusion they create for the recipient of political discourse, that he is no longer a "passive" actor, he has become an active one almost overnight. In other words, instead of a consumer, he is now a participant. The idea springs mainly from the interactive dimension of the internet, and it is most obvious in the case of social networking sites, where you can "add" your favorite politician on your list of friends just as you can add your favourite rock star. By contrast, on a candidate's personal web page or on his blog, you can write your opinion on a given topic, without ever getting to be so visible.

Also, all these strategies create a false feeling of intimacy between politician and citizen. Internet access has generated a feeling of closeness that was totally absent from the previous media star, television. When you are online, when you see pictures of a public figure, when you find out information about him and his family and you get access to his innermost thoughts, you feel as though you had known that person all your life. This also gives you the impression that the politician in question has a life similar to yours, an impression which is in most cases wrong. Internet profile has boosted the impression of *Monsieur Tout Le Monde*⁵, for all politicians, in all situations. Moreover, you are under the impression that you can express your own opinion and that it will be heard and taken into account.

Case – study: Crin Antonescu vs. Mircea Geoană

We shall now focus on two Romanian politicians, Crin Antonescu and Mircea Geoană; they both participated in the 2009 presidential elections and they both lost – Crin Antonescu was eliminated in the first round, while Mircea Geoană was defeated by the incumbent president, Traian Băsescu, in the second round. We shall try to identify some of the most important elements occurring in their official web pages, personal blogs and social

⁵ *Monsieur tout-le-monde, the common man* (Gabriel Thoveron, *Comunicarea Politică Azi*, Ed. Antet, 1996, p. 91)

networking profiles. For the purpose of the present paper, we shall limit our research to accessing the politicians' web-pages, blogs and Facebook profiles.

If we analyze the Social-Democratic candidate in the 2009 Romanian presidential elections, Mircea Geoană, we become aware of the following aspects:

When we access the front page (www.mirceageoana.ro), we discover that the politician's web page is rather formal in style. The entries listed on the right refer to topical issues in Romanian politics. The entries are updated according to the importance of the events taking place in the Romanian social and political environment. The moment we are writing this paper (04 June 2010), the debated issues refer to: the announced 25% decrease in the salaries of staff working in the public sector and its negative impact on the economy, (*Reducerea cu 25% a salariilor inseamnă dublarea nivelului sărăciei din Romania*), the role that the Social-Democratic party and its doctrine takes on in the context of the economic crisis (*Social-Democrația și criza actuală*), a positive-oriented⁶ reference to the need for generating employment (*Guvernanța economică, locurile de muncă și creșterea economică constituie provocarea principală pentru Europa astăzi*), and a negative⁷ reference to the way in which, in the author's perspective, the president in office has lied to the Romanian nation (*Decalogul minciunii. De Traian Băsescu*). All these issues are topical, of great interest to the politician's supporters and to the Romanian nation in general, and they are all presented in a formal manner. The main picture, displayed on the left of the page, is taken in an official context, Mircea Geoană is delivering a speech in front of an audience. However, below the formal picture, we see a more casual one, where the former candidate is holding a little girl in his arms. Recently added, this second picture softens the overall image of Mircea Geoană and presents him as a humane person, someone we can trust in this time of need and turmoil – the image perfectly fits the left-oriented doctrine and the measures of social protection that the candidate's party supports. It is also appropriate, since it opposes the Liberal Democratic Party's proposed measures of diminishing social assistance amounts, among which the much debated maternity allowance.

Mircea Geoană's web page also presents a picture of his book, *Trust* – a well-chosen word since we have been noticing a dramatic decline in the extent to which citizens trust the political class.

⁶ A positive approach, centered on self-assertion (Antonia Scurtuțescu, *Promisiunea politică*, Ed. Lucman, București, 2006, pp. 177-188).

⁷ Negative approach, focusing on attacks against the opponent (*ibid.*, pp. 188- 209).

On top of the page, we see some formal files that can be accessed (projects, speeches, supporters), but also a link to the former candidate's blog. We follow the link and access the blog, to find that the politician has kept the formal approach here as well. The main entry (*Time for Diplomacy*) refers to the present situation in Romania in a former register. While a potential reader might respect the author's past and experience as a diplomat and trust that his perspective on facts is correct, he might be disappointed by the remoteness of the approach and might also find the entry a bit too long and, maybe, dull. We must remember the fact that not all voters with an internet access have a Ph.D. in international relations; actually, some of them might only have an elementary education. Nothing personal appears on the blog, we catch no glimpse of the man behind the politician. Everything is aimed at building a credible public image of the author.

At the end of the page, we encounter a link which sends us to the candidate's profile on Facebook, one of the most popular social networking sites in our days. When we take a look at the politician's profile, we see that, in spite of the fact that he has 3386 friends at the moment we are writing this paper, the approach is, again, a very formal one. The former candidate is active on Facebook and presents some recent posts (latest one – 24 May); however, there are only serious statements to put forward (such as: *Major strategic changes affect Europe and the world*, or *80 million Europeans are threatened by poverty*). The profile picture makes a very good impression, though, since the politician is casually dressed and has a large smile on his face.

Crin Antonescu's website presents some informal elements from the very beginning. The formal element is also present, as are references to important issues in Romania's political and economic situation. Still, the first file to access on top of the page is *Crin*. By putting forward only his first name, the former candidate aims at being perceived as closer to us, like a friend. The informal, casual approach is also obvious from the politician's choice of language: "debandada extraordinară", "banditism portocaliu"; the words are relaxed and familiar without a trace of vulgarity.

The website is eye-catching and youthful in appearance, with a dark blue vs. light blue background. (Blue is also the colour of the National Liberal Party's logo, the arrow). The choice of blue as a main color is also informal in style, as opposed to Mircea Geoană's choice of plain white mainly, with a touch of light grey at the bottom of the page.

Not only is the liberal candidate's web page well organized and eye-catching, it is also in tune with his own personality and with his target audience. Statistics have shown that the majority of Crin Antonescu's voters in the December 2009 elections was composed of

young people; by contrast, Mircea Geoană's target electors were older people (the Social Democratic Party's traditional supporters), to which the candidate's alleged lack of charisma and political blunders added only few voters from other strata of society. Mircea Geoană's web-page also matches the owner's perceived personality, which is plain, unsparkling. This description might not do justice to the truth, but it does reflect public perception in general. We are not expressing our own opinion here, we are presenting some generally accepted facts which led to the outcome of the 2009 elections.

On Crin Antonescu's website, we notice a white box, in deep contrast with the dark blue, presenting various issues for discussion. The previous one we noticed - campaigning against the current president – has been replaced by a new one, describing the differences between genuine vs. fake right-wing politics (*Dreapta autentică și retorica dreptei de impostură*). The fragment represents the liberal's latest blog entry, a preview of which becomes available on his personal webpage. In his view, the personal webpage and the blog become intertwined, as related facets of the same public figure. This fact is also informal, and very suited for the politician we are speaking about.

It is interesting to notice that, although both politicians have their own staff organizing their internet pages, their web pages seem to correspond to the public image they have been identified with.

Another difference between the two websites comes from the fact that, while the Social Democratic Party's former president has the party logo on top of the page, Crin Antonescu's page displays the party logo at the end of the page. Again, this marks the difference formal vs. informal, official position vs. personal position, as it seems to suggest that, while Mircea Geoană is identifying with the party he comes from and relies primarily on its support, Crin Antonescu relies mainly on himself and the party depends on him. Not surprisingly so, this stance corresponds to the reality demonstrated by the first round of the 2009 presidential elections: while Geoană could not rise above PSD's traditional percentage – around 30%, Antonescu exceeded PNL's traditional percentage (15%) by 7%, attaining an all-time high 22% for a liberal candidate in Romania.

Both former candidates have links sending us to their personal blog, and they also send us to their social network profile. Thus, Geoană sends us to Facebook, Twitter, Youtube and LinkedIn, while Antonescu refers to Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, YouTube, and also Flickr. The appearance of these links on the candidates' personal web pages is important,

since it helps us distinguish between their real profile and “fake” ones (identity theft is thriving in the virtual world, especially in the case of well-known public personalities).

Another plus for the liberal candidate springs from the presence, under the links sending us to his other virtual descriptions, of a tab for “your messages”, written in large letters. This is not the case with Mircea Geoană’s profile, or at least, it is not the case at the moment we are writing the present paper (04 June 2010), and it seems to block viewers’ intention to communicate with the political actor. One more aspect emphasizing Crin Antonescu’s openness to contacts with the public, his interest in being perceived as someone close to us and just like us, unlike Mircea Geoană, who has chosen a more distant relation with the public.

The entries on Crin Antonescu’s web-page refer to: the government’s refusal to decrease acquisition expenses (*Nu am auzit un cuvânt despre reducerea cheltuielilor din banul public ale clientelei, nici un cuvânt or Guvernul nu face nici cel mai mic gest de reducere a cheltuielilor. Vin în schimb să ceară solidaritate*), a negative approach directed against the government in office, the old socialist stories that the Social Democratic party is allegedly relying on (another negative approach, this time directed against the main opposition rival, PSD) – *Economic, România nu-și va reveni cu “vechile povești socialiste”, PSD să le lase deoparte* and a promise to vote for the oncoming no-confidence motion against the government (*Vom vota moțiunea. Pentru cauza și efectul ei*). Very much like Mircea Geoană, Antonescu has grasped the latest developments on the social and political arena and has displayed them on his website.

We shall now turn to the candidate’s blog and make a few remarks about it. “Anyone who spends more than 15 minutes browsing blogs at random will soon find that blogs have become part and parcel of politics, especially in the US. (...) The political blogosphere ranges from thoughtful commentary to vicious slander, on both sides of the American political divide.”⁸

From the USA, the habit of blogging for political purposes has spread around the world, and Romania is no exception. If in the 2004 presidential elections, this strategy was unheard of, in 2009 all three major candidates were using a personal blog to keep connected with their electors. In terms of the topics covered by their entries, they were either positive (self-assertive) or negative (attacking the opponents); since both candidates we are now

⁸ Bob Walsh, *Clear Blogging – How People Blogging are Changing the World and How You Can Join Them*, Apress, Berkeley, CA, 2007.

focusing on have lost the elections, the frequency of their blog entries has gone down; however, neither of them has given up on this means of communication, as the dates the blogs have been updated prove.

Crin Antonescu as a private person is present both on the website (*Am intrat in politică pentru că m-am enervat* – we see a living person, with normal reactions), and on the blog (reference to Gheorghe Dinică's death for instance, a positive politeness strategy aimed at his audience, *Pariu pentru oamenii destepti* - a neutral strategy of flattering the electors – these are older entries.) etc. Also, in the beginning of the blog, the liberal leader claims that he expresses his thoughts in a direct, sincere manner.

When switching to the two politicians' Facebook profile, we see that the roles have been reversed. While Antonescu displays his 2009 presidential poster as a profile picture, Mircea Geoană, as we have said before, shows us a real-life picture of himself, casually dressed, smiling. The information that they supply to the public also contributes to a better image of Mircea Geoană, as a person closer to us, whom we might consider adding to our friends list. While Crin Antonescu presents a list of factual, professional data (such as his website, university education, employer and political views), Mircea Geoană also presents his religious views (the religious appeal in politics always has a major impact on people, especially in a country like Romania), interests and favorite music. By openly supporting music band like Led Zeppelin, Pink Floyd and Phoenix, he appears as a classy, young-at-heart politician. Geoană also has placed an important part of his impressive CV on Facebook; this could both help and damage him, depending on who accesses his profile. While young people with university education might be impressed, less educated people with internet access might find that the politician is showing off his diplomas. Neither of the two former candidates actually speaks to supporters, which is understandable considering their busy schedule and the fact that, probably, even their social profile is managed by someone else.

Problems with a politician's self-assertion online

The most important problem with this new way of marketing yourself seems to be related to the issue of identity theft. If you do not own and control your online persona, it is incredibly easy for anyone to aggregate the known public information about you in order to create a fake one. Obviously, there is a lot of information available to public knowledge about any politician; hence, a fake profile online looks like the easiest thing in the world. Internet

has been, from the beginning, a place prone to chaos and illusions; the phenomenon seems to have exploded with the appearance of social networking sites.

Apart from ruining your reputation, business connections and social life, the identity theft can go even further if your financial data are stolen and used for criminal purposes. However, this is usually the case with people who are not public figures; in the case of celebrities (and politicians in recent years have undoubtedly joined this category), the damage done to one's image is by far the most common situation in the case of an identity theft. Thus, the problem with internet profiles remains the fact that anyone can be anyone online.

Conclusions

In the present paper, we have attempted to highlight some aspects related to the way in which politicians choose to market themselves online. No one can ignore the huge impact that the internet has on potential electors, especially young voters. However, to the extent to which internet access is becoming a must in all professions, even older people are learning to accept the fact. Consequently, all politicians have started appealing to this new means of communication, trying to gain an advantage from the way they present themselves on the internet. More and more, it seems that the internet has replaced the old means of communication (the written media and television, mainly); more and more, it seems that, nowadays, internet makes the super-star. Even the political super-star.

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