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E-The People: a comparative perspective on the use of social networks in U.S. and French electoral campaigns

E-Povo: uma perspectiva comparada sobre o uso de redes sociais nas campanhas eleitorais dos Estados Unidos e França

E-Pueblo: una perspectiva comparada sobre el uso de las redes sociales en las campañas electorales en los Estados Unidos y en Francia

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ABSTRACT

This paper first provides a historical overview of Internet use in French and American electoral campaigns. It then studies political practices on social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter and Pinterest in the 2012 U.S. and French electoral campaigns. The reasons for the adoption of social networks by campaign teams are discussed and interpreted. Two case studies show the importance of public controversies, of the blurred boundaries between public and private lives as well as of the need for politicians to display grass roots participation in politics.

Keywords: elections; social networks; Facebook; Twitter; Pinterest.

RESUMEN

Este artículo presenta, inicialmente, una revisión histórica del uso del internet en las campañas electorales norteamericanas y francesas. En seguida, analiza actos de campaña en redes sociales como Facebook, Twitter y Pinterest en los Estados Unidos y Francia en 2012. Las razones para la adopción de redes sociales por los equipos de campaña son discutidas e interpretadas. Dos estudios de caso muestran la importancia de controversias públicas y del apagamiento de las fronteras entre vida pública y privada, así como de la necesidad, para los políticos, de exhibir la participación del ciudadano ordinario en la política.

Palabras clave: elecciones; redes sociales; Facebook; Twitter; Pinterest.

RESUMO

Este artigo apresenta, inicialmente, uma revisão histórica do uso da internet nas campanhas eleitorais norte-americanas e francesas. A seguir, analisa práticas de campanha em redes sociais como Facebook, Twitter e Pinterest nos Estados Unidos e na França em 2012. As razões para a adoção de redes sociais pelos comitês de campanha são discutidas e interpretadas. Dois estudos de caso mostram a importância de controvérsias públicas e do apagamento das fronteiras entre vida pública e privada, assim como da necessidade, para os políticos, de exibir a participação do cidadão comum na política.

Palavras-chave: eleições; redes sociais; Facebook; Twitter; Pinterest.

New communication techniques and tools have been introduced in electoral campaigns for the past sixteen years (CHADWICK, 2006: 175; FOOT & SCHNEIDER, 2006; RAINIE, 2007; PANAGOPOULOS, 2009). In the United States, politicians on the campaign trail have been using all of the platforms afforded by the Internet ever since the mass adoption of the network by the public. France initially lagged behind, but caught up as early as the 2002 presidential elections, and even more so in 2007 and 2012. More recent campaigns both in the U.S. and in France have made use of social networks such as Meetup, Facebook, Twitter and, more recently Pinterest. Different as these social networks may be, they all share some common features: they are “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.” (boyd [sic], ELLISON, 2007). To put it differently, social networks “locate people in the context of their acquaintances, provide a framework for maintaining an extensive array of friends and other contacts, and allow for the public display of interpersonal commentary” (DONATH, 2007).

When so defined, it looks as if social networks might attract private individuals only. Observation shows, however, that they are heavily used in the public sphere and more specifically, in electoral campaigns. Why do politicians and their campaign teams rely on social networks to help spread their message? How do they appropriate the various tools provided by social networking sites? Do social networks bring an added value to more traditional uses of the Internet? To answer these questions, let us first provide a diachronic analysis of the main stages of Internet use in electoral campaigning, before outlining the ways in which social networking sites are used in electoral campaigns through two case studies. Then we will attempt to ascertain the reasons why social networking sites have been adopted by politicians both in the United States and in France.

Methodology

This research is grounded on the observation of the use of social networks in the U.S. presidential campaign as well in the French legislative elections during a one-month period, from June 6th to July 6th 2012. The choice of Facebook, Twitter and Pinterest was based on their degree of penetration in the public sphere. With nearly one

billion users worldwide, Facebook has now become a household word; Twitter follows at a distance, but its roughly five hundred million users prove that its notoriety keeps growing (Lunden, 2012). At around twelve million regular users, Pinterest is a relative newcomer, but its fast growth and its originality make it a useful point of comparison for the other two social networking sites (PEREZ, 2012). Pinterest was also adopted by the wives of the main candidates to the U.S. presidency, with Ann Romney starting from February, and Michelle Obama following in June (JENNINGS, 2012), showing that campaign teams perceived the site to be useful. As such, it deserved scrutiny.

The author of this article joined the Facebook pages, the Twitter feed and the Pinterest pins of Barack Obama and Mitt Romney, inasmuch as they are the chief contenders in the 2012 U.S. presidential campaign. In France, as the presidential elections had just ended at the time of the observation, giving way to the legislative elections, right- and left-wing candidates to the legislative elections were followed on the same sites, in addition to Valerie Trierweiler, the French president's partner. The pages on social networking sites were observed daily, and the messages as well as the pictures were subjected to content analysis framed by the research questions detailed above.

A brief historical overview

Ever since the Internet became mainstream in the United States, politicians have used it to convey their message. In the presidential campaigns of 1996 and 2000, as well as in mid-term elections, the main candidates created elaborate websites, which served as repositories of manifestoes, speech transcripts, audio and video clips of the candidate on the campaign trail (BIMBER, 1998: 392; DULIO et al, 1999: 55; KAMARCK 1999; FOOT & SCHNEIDER, 2002: 17; KAMARCK 2002; SERFATY, 2002: 76; BIMBER, 2003; CHADWICK, 2006: 152). They also served as fundraising and mobilization tools (SERFATY, 2002: 76-77; WILSON, 2002: 43-74). Unlike television and its 20-second soundbites, websites enabled the publication of lengthy documents and statements of purpose. They made possible the full deployment of each candidate's rhetoric. Therefore the early campaign websites were essentially a throwback to older political forms (SERFATY, 2002: 79) and they did not really enable communication with the voters, except in the one-directional form of a newsletter (KAMARCK, 1999: 121; SERFATY, 2002).

When Howard Dean sought the Democratic nomination for the 2004 presidential race, he introduced a truly innovative element, inasmuch as his official website contained links to the blogs of his supporters (SERFATY, 2006: 28-30). The animated conversations on these blogs powerfully contributed to making Dean's Internet campaign come alive. He did not win the nomination, but his campaign focused everybody's mind on the real communication opportunity afforded by Internet campaigns, i.e. the conversational mode between candidates and supporters, and among supporters themselves. Moreover, Dean's followers used the social networking site Meetup to coordinate campaigning and to ratchet up support for their candidate. The volunteer work carried out online as well as the interactivity between campaign officials and grassroots followers pointed the way to a modification of campaign practices (SERFATY, 2006: 29; PERLMUTTER, 2008: 73).

In France, political communication made use of information technology in a broadly similar pattern, though with a few months' delay. Initially, the Internet was only adopted by fringe parties that attempted to bypass the usual barriers to notoriety with the help of inexpensive, state-of-the art technology (MOREAU, 1998: 144; VERGEER et al., 2011). However, as soon as broadband Internet access became widespread in France, mainstream parties set up sites that were far more effective in their use of new technology (VERGEER et al., 2011). Again as in the U.S., these websites did not enable any interactivity until the 2004 European elections. It was in 2007 that French presidential candidates Ségolène Royal and Nicolas Sarkozy set up fully-fledged websites, and the 2012 French presidential campaign confirmed that political communication specialists made use of all the "affordances" (NORMAN, 1988) of social networks, i.e., they primarily sought to take advantage of interactivity in all its guises.

In the U.S., the 2008 primaries and presidential campaign were similarly marked by the adoption of interactive campaign methods (RAINIE & SMITH, 2008). By that time, social networks such as MySpace (then top of the heap) and Facebook had become widely used, mostly among teenagers. The main candidates all had their own pages, with Barack Obama a clear leader in the number of followers and in the savvy use of social networking techniques. Politicians' profiles differed in no way from those of all the other users: politicians had to conform to the rigid framework provided by the site, to sometimes comic effect. Followers could post their own pictures and comments, as they would for anyone else of their friends, in a process that is now thoroughly

familiar to the public. Moreover, for the main candidates, the 2012 presidential campaign has expanded to all available social networks, including Twitter and Pinterest. What some researchers have called the “bandwagon effect” is probably at work here (FU et al., 2012): the diffusion of social networks is such among the population at large that politicians are required to join as well (DRUCKMAN et al., 2009; GUEORGUIEVA, 2009). Indeed, as shown by a recent Pew Internet report, “80% of American adults use the internet and 66% of those online adults participate in social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook, LinkedIn, or Google+. That amounts to more than half of the entire U.S. population” (RAINIE & SMITH, 2012). No politician can afford to ignore such long-term trends.

Political practices on Facebook, Twitter and Pinterest

All three networks under consideration foreground multi-mediality, albeit with a different focus for each one: pictures for Pinterest, brief messages for Twitter, interpersonal conversations for Facebook. All three networks also encourage users, and more particularly politicians, to garner as many followers as possible, with figures in the millions on Facebook, in the hundreds of thousands on Twitter and Pinterest. There are now tools that enable the simultaneous updating of all social networks, thus leading to a degree of repetitiveness, yet each one of these networks retains its own originality.

Facebook offers politicians the opportunity of turning their activities into a sustained narrative, of listening to what grass-roots voters have to say and of interacting with them. This process is above all based on cross referencing, sharing and word-of-mouth, since followers can repost messages on their own profiles, reach their own friend base and potentially make each posting viral. Facebook also offers politicians and public figures a profiling of their followers and numerous statistics, thus enabling campaign managers to evaluate the impact of their online activity. Politicians can have a page that has to fit the model imposed by the site, displaying their age, tastes or personal pictures, without any size limit. A major aspect of these Facebook pages is that whoever signs up by clicking the “like” button can post a comment and get a response from the campaign team. Although some observers charge that these comments are not spontaneous, but orchestrated by the campaign team (SECO, 2012), they play an important part in the campaign, as we shall see later on.

Twitter started out as radically different from Facebook, inasmuch as the size of each message is limited to 140 characters, although this is likely to change in the near future (MANJOO, 2012): politicians can post, but can also direct messages to other ‘tweeters’ thanks to the @person’s name convention. Each message can include one or more ‘hashtags’, i.e. keywords preceded by the ‘sharp’ symbol (#), enabling the categorization of each message and its easy retrieval: in this way, Twitter can function as a content detector, signaling to others important information published in other venues. A tweet can be ‘re-tweeted’ by whoever is part of the ‘followers’ of any given tweeter. Moreover, pictures and videos can be accessed through short links. Unlike Facebook, where friends have to be authorized before they can be part of one’s circle, on Twitter, people can follow anyone they wish, and be followed as well, thus giving a more accessible social networking dimension to what originally was a micro-blogging site. Another important feature of Twitter is that it can be used to comment on events in real time, enabling the participation of one’s followers in significant events.

On Pinterest, the most recent of the three networks studied here, members “pin” pictures, select which members they wish to follow and can ‘re-pin’ the pictures and videos of whoever they follow and comment on any of these pictures. This is the root of the portmanteau word “Pinterest”, made up of the contraction of “pinboard” and “interest”. The main difference between Pinterest and the other social networks devoted to pictures such as Flickr or Instagram is that on Pinterest, in addition to uploading their own pictures, users can “pin” and share pictures they have found on other sites. Users can create a variety of thematic “boards” with images “pinned” from other sites. Figures show that the most popular topics are cooking and fashion, for a predominantly female and Midwestern audience (EVERITT, 2012). Yet, because of the strong impact pictures can have on the minds of viewers, and thanks to the comments section, Pinterest has turned into one more indispensable item in the toolkit available to online campaigners. The fact that Pinterest passed the 10 million users mark in just a few months is another incentive for politicians to showcase their platform there.

Case study n° 1: Twitter in the 2012 French legislative election

Just one month after the presidential election, France voted on Sunday June 17th 2012 to elect 544 representatives to the National Assembly, out of a total of 577, thirty-six representatives having already been voted in after the first round on June 10th. At

just under 56%, the turnout was low, reflecting voter fatigue due to scheduling two important elections in such a short time span. Socialists and affiliated parties garnered nearly 55% of the votes, thus giving the center left absolute control of the lower house.

Ségolène Royal and Jack Lang, two major figures of the Socialist party, were defeated as were center right party leader François Bayrou and Nadine Morano, a former member of the Sarkozy administration. The far-right National Front got two seats, a first since 1997. One of them was won by 22-year old law student Marion Maréchal-Le Pen, niece to the far right party leader, Marine Le Pen. The far left Leftist Front won ten seats, a figure considered to be disappointing by party leaders. Hollande's solid majority in the lower house has to be seen against a background where Socialists also control the Senate and most regional and local authorities. This gave President François Hollande a strong mandate to implement his reform agenda, without having to rely on alliances with the hardline Leftist Front.

During the campaign, the use of social networks predictably intensified, but with a somewhat surprising twist, since Twitter became a major tool. Among the uninterrupted flow of tweets from politicians on the campaign trail about their upcoming meetings before the election run-off, and countless laudatory messages about voters and allies, a few controversial ones stood out, as can be seen in the following two examples.

On June 13th, a few days before the second round of the elections, Nadine Morano, a former member of the Sarkozy administration, was called over the phone by comedian Gérard Dahan, posing as the far right National Front deputy-leader, Louis Aliot. In the course of the conversation, Morano defined National Front leader Marine Le Pen as "very talented", thus expressing support for a party that up until now had been kept firmly outside the pale by her center right allies. Former Prime Minister François Fillon chided her on Twitter, writing that "she should have hung up. One doesn't talk to a National Front leader." Morano lashed back that Fillon was no longer her boss, and that she would speak with whomever she chose. Tweets of support abounded for each of the politicians involved.

A day earlier, another tweet had caused an even greater stir: Valérie Trierweiler, President Hollande's partner, had tweeted a message of support to Olivier Falorni, that read: "Words of encouragement to Olivier Falorni who has not been undeserving, and who has been fighting alongside the inhabitants of La Rochelle for many years." This would sound like a pretty tame message, except for its context. The Socialist party, with

Hollande's backing, had chosen to impose Segolène Royal's candidacy in La Rochelle. Local Socialist candidate Falorni refused what he saw as the authoritarian decision of the party machine, stood against her, and was promptly excluded from the party, a development that only increased his already widespread support among La Rochelle's population. Falorni won by a wide margin.

The reason why it is difficult to dismiss this as mere party politics is due to the identity of the tweeter. Trierweiler is said to be deeply hostile to Royal, Mr Hollande's partner for thirty years and the mother of his four children. Publicly supporting Royal's opponent in complete opposition to the President's choices thus becomes an act of private, and not only political, defiance.

These two incidents raise several questions, the first one being: Why choose Twitter for political pronouncements? Its 140-character limit would seem to preclude the possibility of expressing anything more than simple declarative statements. Yet, it is exactly the opposite that seems to happen. Statements are pared down to their bare essentials, thus making tweets very similar to their ancestor, the soundbite. Unlike the short statements on TV, however, a tweet has a degree of permanence and can be endlessly re-tweeted, each time adding responses, comments or links to other sites. Hence Twitter can become an effective arena for politicians to spark controversies and to fuel them over a long period of time. The more lively and protracted a controversy is, the more impact it can have on the political agenda.

Moreover, in the two examples quoted above, the original tweets elicited responses from other politicians. François Fillon commented on Morano's tweet; Valerie Pécresse, another former member of the Sarkozy administration, tweeted right back after Trierweiler's message of encouragement to Falorni, asking "Is it a fake?" This shows that Tweeter now is a platform for exchanges between politicians of opposing parties. Such direct dialogues, unmediated by party machines, spin doctors or TV presenters, are valued by an electorate that is ever more suspicious of pre-packaged press releases. The Trierweiler statement thus acquired even more importance precisely because it had not been approved beforehand by any party authority.

There is another reason why the Trierweiler tweet had such an impact. Drawing as it did on widely shared rumors of strained relationships between Royal and Trierweiler, it made manifest the blurring of the boundaries between public and private life that characterizes modern campaigns. President Hollande kept repeating throughout his campaign that he intended to be a "normal" President, as opposed to his predecessor,

Nicolas Sarkozy, whom he portrayed as media-obsessed. This meant keeping public life strictly separate from private life, and rigidly controlling his self-presentation in the media.

The Trierweiler tweet irremediably impaired his claim to ‘normalcy’, since it exposed a personal matter to the public at large. However, it also, quite paradoxically, showed him and his partner to be similar to the population at large, with the usual in-couple squabbling and sharp disagreements. This slip from the carefully crafted image publicized throughout the campaign thus gave the public an insight into Hollande’s private life which made the President appear to be more in touch with the way “the other half lives”. As we shall see later on, the exposure of private life corresponds to deep-seated social evolutions. For the present, let us merely say that Twitter played an essential part in this incident. The mixture of private elements with public ones, the naturalness of the exchanges, the very mundane way in which they can be written and uploaded with a smartphone, all of this turns Twitter into a medium that merges seamlessly into everyday life practices for the public and for politicians alike.

Case study n° 2: Obama and Romney on Twitter, Facebook and Pinterest

The Obama campaign strategists use Twitter in what has now become the traditional way of taking advantage of social networks: they request small donations, some as small as three dollars and up to ten dollars, thus variously offering people a chance to enter the sweepstakes and win a dinner with the President or a chance to get a car magnet. They also make policy announcements and provide information on campaign issues. Here are, for example, the tweets posted on July 2nd. All of the links refer either to the Facebook page maintained by the campaign team or to the official Obama-Biden campaign site:

“Deadline deal: Give \$10 or more before midnight, get a car magnet. Simple as that: <http://OFA.BO/6aCngv>”

“President Obama on tonight's fundraising deadline: "This is important." Pitch in \$3 before midnight: <http://OFA.BO/NNZpqq>”

“Congress has just 32 days before its summer recess to take action on jobs: <http://OFA.BO/LTBFvo>”

“Erica was 26 and without health insurance when she fell into a coma. Here's what happened next. <http://OFA.BO/egZC6s>”

“A skeptic comes around on the Affordable Care Act: “The very thing that I criticized is what is going to save my life.” <http://OFA.BO/vx8hiL>”

Twitter is also used as a mobilizing tool, to garner grass roots support for the campaign itself, or for specific policies that are emblematic of the Obama administration, as in the following example:

“Introducing Dashboard—a new, one-stop shop with all the tools you need to organize for #Obama2012 in your community: <http://OFA.BO/ohrvyv>” (July 2nd, 2012).

An interesting feature of Twitter is that it allows anyone to respond directly to anyone else, using the @name convention. People thus answer directly the messages posted by the Obama campaign, without any of the filtering that can be carried out by campaign teams on Facebook. In fact, although tweeters can remove their own tweets, the recipients cannot erase them on their own newsfeed. In addition, Twitter refuses to remove content that might be judged offensive without a court order (Halliday, 2012; Guttman, 2012), although it complies with 75% of government demands to surrender data about users (Salon, 2012). On Facebook, on the other hand, users can erase their own posts, as well as erase those of others, and Facebook complies with requests from various sources seeking to remove content that is deemed inappropriate. Twitter’s approach makes for lively, sometimes downright crude comments on whatever items politicians post. And because the debate never ends, the campaign issues become part of a dynamic, open-ended, and ever developing system of ideas and potential action. In the following example, the President’s campaign team tries to elicit support for the Affordable Care Act before the Supreme Court’s decision. The official message reads:

“Say you're standing with President Obama on health care: <http://OFA.BO/Ptb7LE>” (June 29th, 2012).

Only one person gives a positive response (Karey Gochoel@kareyrose), while most people express opposition to the statute, as can be seen in the following excerpts:

“No thank you. I dont[sic] think I should be penalized for something I cannot afford. I guess I will be voting Rep. for the 1st time”
 “Where can I turn in my political asylum request?”
 “**Say you're** going to bring @barackObama down Nov 6, 2012” RT [retweet]
 “Or what? You'll impose a 'penalty tax'? RT”

The same process can be observed for Mitt Romney, whose presence on Twitter, however, is far weaker than Obama's. In the following message, the Romney campaign team seeks to mobilize supporters by calling on them to take a stand:

“Sign the petition and stand with me if you believe these high unemployment numbers are unacceptable <http://mi.tt/NceAOI>.” (Mitt Romney's campaign, July 6th, 2012).

The responses are mostly negative, with some people offering strategic or tactical advice:

“petitions? Really? You have got to do better than that!!! Get tough!!!”

“Where do we sign the petition against outsourcing?”

“I believe off shore accounts are unacceptable.”

“QUIT being mr. nice guy, and start verbally kicking obama in the balls. they play dirty, throw crap back at them. dont [sic] lay down.”

These ironic, even sarcastic comments cannot be censored by the Romney or the Obama campaign teams, and their negativity might appear to be harmful to the message. Yet their presence points to the existence of controversy, and as such, they may actually help the message along, by conferring upon it the aura of political debate. Thanks to the existence of such sarcastic messages, the propagandistic tendencies that are inherent to political advertising can be muted, and the campaign positions benefit from the buzz created around them.

On Facebook, on the other hand, the tone is mostly laudatory, because campaign teams can get rid of offensive messages. In addition, the sometimes overly positive tone is also inbuilt in the Facebook software. A “like” button exists, but there is no “dislike” button, precisely because the Facebook designers sought to avoid encouraging conflict and strife among users. The negative advertising that is authorized in American campaigns can, however, still be found on Facebook. For instance, on June 22nd, 2012, a placard criticizing Bain Capital, the company Romney used to own, fills up almost all the screen. The four thousand plus comments include many contradictory, sometimes even cutting responses, foregrounding the debating potentialities Facebook offers. Political communication is no longer confined to a one-to-many channel, but becomes multi-directional and open to direct challenges by the public, without any of the usual filters.

Twitter is also used for negative advertising, as can be seen in the following example:

“The President's policies have not gotten America working again. He is going to have to stand up and take responsibility for that.” (Mitt Romney's campaign, July 6th, 2012)

“A report on how Romney's firm invested in companies that specialized in relocating American jobs overseas: <http://OFA.BO/y8Pzw5>” (June 22nd, 2012)

“If you agree with President Obama that everyone deserves a shot at higher education, RT this image: <http://pic.twitter.com/3FZxwpoj>” (July 2nd, 2012)

The image then shows a picture of Mitt Romney next to Barack Obama, with a caption under each one. Romney's caption reads: “Students should ‘get as much education as they can afford’,” while Obama's caption reads: “Higher education cannot be a luxury reserved for the privileged few. It is an economic necessity.”

This is a very traditional comparison ad, in which the juxtaposition of the two statements is meant to attack and diminish the opponent by quoting his words, possibly out of context. Yet this can be perceived as an increase in the truthfulness of the campaign and as such, it can get the public's approval (FINKEL & GEER, 1998). This seems to be borne out by the number of people who forwarded the message to their own followers: as of July 3rd, there were already over 10,600 re-tweets, a very significant number on a site where most political statements are re-tweeted in the low hundreds.

On Pinterest, the same dichotomy between the sedate official campaign and the heated debate of potential voters appears. The official campaign site is entitled “Obama-Biden 2012”. It is entirely made up of pictures linked to other sites, such as Instagram, Flickr or Twitter, or the official Facebook page. It contains the usual mixture of official events and private life events, but no comments are allowed. However, typing “Obama” into the search window of the site gives access to what individuals re-pin, as well as to the comments they make. In this unofficial venue, the situation is altogether different, with protracted controversies about the President's policies, and satirical pictures that have been re-pinned so often that they saturate the available space. The same situation prevails for Mitt Romney, with visuals denser than comments. The overall effect is that of a glutted space, in which the comments provide a breathing space.

Discussion and interpretation

How can the presence of candidates to the highest office on social networking sites be interpreted? In addition to the bandwagon effect mentioned earlier, the first motivation has to do with the need for politicians to drum up participation. The comments made possible by social networks lead to more participatory politics; each person commenting on the candidate's website contributes to the creation of a vast conversation, building up over time the narrative of the public's participation to the candidate's campaign. Hence, the candidate's page is co-built and co-produced by each comment, be it from opponents or from supporters. Co-production becomes an essential element of political participation (Serfaty, 2009). The collaborative development of policies and strategies thus becomes a political form of crowd sourcing. Thanks to social networks, politicians do not merely pay lip-service to the notion of grass roots participation, they actually implement it.

In addition, an interesting and essentially innovative aspect of Facebook, Twitter or Pinterest is the news feed, i.e. the continuous stream of information about a person's contacts, their status updates or Twitter comments containing links to other pages. People commenting on a politician's page or responding to a political tweet thus communicate their views to their entire network (KUSHIN & KITCHENER, 2009). As has been shown by early research in mass communication, people are not likely to modify their behavior in accordance with the messages of mass media unless these messages have also been relayed by acquaintances (KATZ & LAZARFELD, 1955). In this process, "weak ties", i.e., people who are not one's close friends or associates, play a crucial part. Friends on Facebook or followers on Twitter mostly belong to the category of "weak ties" made possible by such networks and are essential to "bridge" the gap between various close-knit groups (GRANOVETTER, 1973: 1375). The newsfeed on Facebook, coming as it does from the widely diverse people that are one's "weak ties", provides the kind of word of mouth that lends credibility to a message and hence to the political leaders uttering them. Being present on Facebook, Pinterest or Twitter is therefore a requirement for politicians who need to generate support for their ideas.

Secondly, the underlying rationale of social networks is one of display: millions of followers, page upon page of comments and pictures – all of these are meant to demonstrate the reality of the people's support for the candidate. On the politicians'

part, it is also an attempt to show that they do not owe their office to their birth or their social status, but that they are truly legitimate (CHAMBAT, 1997: 56; SERFATY, 2009: 377). Because grass-roots support can be showcased online thanks to the pictures, videos and above all the comments posted by members of the public, the use of social networks has become a standard feature of political communication.

Finally, and certainly most importantly, social networks make for a more relaxed, less formal type of political communication. Politicians publish items that run the gamut of everyday life, from cake recipes to wedding albums through pictures of pets, all of which are abundantly commented on by supporters or opponents. Typically, both the posts by campaign staff and the responses by followers mix the personal and the political, the rational and the emotional. Campaign strategists have made extensive use of the idea that the more personal an item of information is, the more people can relate to it and remember it. On social networks, politicians no longer pose as authority figures, they no longer adopt a statesman-like attitude, but they allow themselves to be cast as regular guys. Informality is the rule.

Is this really nothing but a tactical move, a ploy to win voters over? Quite to the contrary, the prevalent informalization of political messages is correlated to the transformation of contemporary relationships to authority and power: the expression of the respect and deference due to authority figures has inexorably declined, while the psychological and social proximity between people from all walks of life has simultaneously increased; at the same time, the expression of emotion becomes the new norm, the behavior standard (GIDDENS, 1991; WOUTERS, 2007; SERFATY, 2010). This is one of the reasons why the public-private boundary inexorably blurs in the contemporary period. Politicians try to put forward their personality, their family life in informal contexts because they need to appeal to large swaths of the population, to people who may be completely un-politicized. They may have lost interest in a political agenda that is entirely based on rationality, but they may respond favorably to pictures of a candidate's private life, or to insights into his personality that may elicit emotional responses. This emotion is needed because it can lead to a sort of temporary catharsis, through which the public can identify with politicians. And the process of emotional identification can in turn influence the way votes are cast. Social networks are the perfect venue to stage an encounter with the emotions that are central to the process of informalization. This informalization process is not due to social networks or to

technology, but to the long-term transformations of society itself. Social networks only provide a framework that sets off these deep-seated social shifts.

For politicians, therefore, a presence on social networks is not a mere whim, but a vital necessity in an era of informalization. Social networks represent an arena in which campaign issues can be debated in everyday language that may bridge the gap between politicians and the public. On Twitter or on Pinterest, grass-roots support can be expressed in people's own words, with all the erratic punctuation and smileys meant to convey emotion. At the same time, opposition to a politician can be couched in no uncertain terms, more sharply and openly than face-to-face. The dynamics of confrontation evidences the engagement of voters and thus provides a campaign with the vitally necessary display of its relevance to the public.

For all that, we still have to keep in mind that Twitter, Facebook or Pinterest campaigns are only elements of a multiple-layer media communication plan, where television and the print press still play a major part. Obama famously had over four million followers on Facebook in 2008, and nearly thirty-one million 'likes' in October 2012, meaning that whoever clicks the "like" button receives daily or hourly updates about the campaign on their Facebook newsfeed. On the other hand, Mitt Romney has fewer than ten million "likes" at the same date, and yet some polls gave him a decisive lead in the forthcoming election. French President Hollande, who was elected with a comfortable majority, has fewer than three hundred thousand of them, while Nicolas Sarkozy lost to him in spite of having more than twice as many such followers. Although campaigning on Facebook has been found to be a reliable indicator of success at the polls in the U.S. (WILLIAMS & GULATI, 2008), this is not confirmed by French electoral outcomes. In addition, except for President Obama, many of whose Facebook followers are not American citizens, these figures are relatively small ones. Therefore, far from reflecting a politician's actual electoral base, they rather indicate the degree of penetration of social media in a given society.

If we take re-tweeting figures as an index of notoriety, we find out that in France, Trierweiler's message was re-tweeted just over six thousand times as of July 2nd, while Morano's re-tweeting figures never go beyond the seven hundred mark, as is the case for most other politicians. Re-tweeting numbers can be higher in the U.S., as became apparent in our case study, but they still remain in the tens of thousands only. Large as such figures may loom on Twitter, they are puny compared to the audience of more traditional media. In fact, Facebook's, Twitter's and Pinterest's power does not

reside in their audience so much as in their agenda-setting function. Journalists now scour social networking sites for newsworthy items which politicians are only too happy to provide, but it is only thanks to the mainstream press and to television that they become known to a wide public and can have an influence on the political debate at large. Facebook, Twitter and Pinterest remain utterly dependent on traditional news outlets acting as an echo chamber. Social networking sites have become indispensable in politics, and they are now part of a cross-media system, in which old and new media intertwine and sustain each other.

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