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ABSTRACT

The objective of this paper is to chart the boundaries of the developing phenomenon of the use of information and communication technologies to support politics by large political organizations such as the European Parliament through the analysis of the online strategy of the European Parliament in its campaign for widening participation in the 2009 European Parliament elections. For the first time, during the electoral campaign, the European Parliament decided to lead its own campaign to raise awareness among citizens and increase turnout, and constructed its campaign on an official website and on five social network sites. The authors have concentrated on the European Parliament website, as well as on its profile on three most used social media sites: Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Since it is difficult to make a deeper comparison between these different online platforms, the authors have tested them on different communicative functions and campaign elements. Through the use of computer-mediated discourse analysis, this descriptive and explorative study has tried to discover the dynamics of the campaign, the reasons for choosing a specific platform for a particular part of the campaign, and the possibility of complementariness between them.

Keywords: Elections, European Parliament, Online Campaigning, Political Communication, Social Media, Strategic Communication

INTRODUCTION

Elections for the European Parliament (EP) should represent a key event in European democratic life, as the EP is the only European body with directly elected representatives that embraces an electoral body of 375 million voters (European Parliament, 2009a), and the 2009 elections were the biggest transnational elections in history.

However, many scholars agree about the lack of democratic legitimacy in the European Union (Ward, 2001). During the 1990s, the non-transparency of the decision-making process in EU institutions raised questions about a democratic deficit. Therefore, the European Union tried to increase accountability and legitimacy levels with treaties and by establishing and applying different policies. One of these policies is the information and communication technology policy, focused on availability and access to information and communication technologies (ICTs).

The Lisbon Agenda, one part of which represents the implementation of the ICT strategy, was launched in 2000. Its last initiative,
the i2010 initiative, created for 2005–2010, stood on three pillars: (1) a single European information space; (2) innovation and investment in research into ICTs; and (3) inclusion, better public services, and better quality of life based on the creation of a European information society (European Commission, 2007). In other words, the initiative included e-government,1 better quality of life, and the overcoming of the digital divide (Gupta, 2009). We share Verdegem’s (2011) view that this initiative represents a reductionist approach by the European Commission and the preference for a neoliberal agenda in which economic goals are prioritized and question if it can contribute to better inclusion and participation. In 2010, a new Digital Agenda for Europe was adopted by the European Commission, which promotes e-inclusion2 (European Commission, 2010). Despite the promising ICT policies, the digital divide has not yet been overcome in the European Union. According to the European Parliament (2009b), today slightly more than 60% of European citizens use the Internet. However, that number was deemed high enough for the European Parliament and political parties to launch online campaigns.

Since the first direct elections for members of EP (MEPs), held in 1979, a gradual decrease in political participation among citizens of countries that participated in the 1979 elections has been observed. In newer member states that joined the EU in 2004 and 2008, except Cyprus and Malta, there is generally low participation (less than 50%). On average, the 2004 turnout was 45.47% (European Parliament, 2009c).

The European Parliament, as an EU institution, created a website in 2005 in the context of EU information and communication technology policies but also as an e-government and e-democracy strategy. In addition to the website, which was completely redesigned in 2008, the EP created a new communication strategy by participating in five social media sites: Facebook, Flickr, MySpace, Twitter, and YouTube (Stephen Clark, personal communication, June 10, 2009). According to Stephen Clark, head of the web communication unit at the Directorate General for Communication in the European Parliament (personal communication, June 10, 2009), during 2004–2009 the Parliament became very concerned for different reasons, such as the problems involved in adopting the European Union constitution, the creation of the Lisbon Treaty, which resulted in a negative outcome for the referendum on the Lisbon Treaty in Ireland in 2008, and negative outcomes for the referendums on the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe in 2005 in France and the Netherlands. In addition, the surveys at the end of 2008 regarding the turnout in the 2009 EP elections were worrying, because the predicted turnout was very low; therefore, a campaign that would try to increase the turnout through introducing novelties brought by the Internet and social media was needed. These novelties should have increased election participation. Studying this attempt is important, because it can provide patterns of Internet use by large political organizations, such as the European Parliament.

This is a descriptive and exploratory study that focuses on the use of websites and social media in the European Parliament online communication campaign that lasted from April until June 2009 with the goal of stimulating participation in the elections. Although the general layout and the content were similar on all five social media, each had its own attributes, adjusted to a particular online platform and for the characteristics of the users of the specific network. Looking at a single website in isolation would be a mistake, because it is important to look at the interrelatedness of the different websites. Therefore, for this research, we analyzed the official website pages dedicated to the elections and three social media sites: Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. We wanted to discover how the campaign was envisaged, to which extent the different online media were connected, what kind of language was used, and if the strategy was adjusted to a particular medium. This study uses a unique approach to the European Parliament communication strategy that has not been previously studied. Drawing upon the theories on Internet use in political
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