The Visibility of Political Websites during Electoral Campaigns

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses how political parties and candidates try to enhance the public visibility of their websites during electoral campaigns, through a process that the author proposes calling the “meta-campaign.” This process significantly depends on the actions of journalists and the way in which they cover electoral campaigns. The discussion is based on an exploratory and qualitative study of the Portuguese campaign for the 2009 European Parliament election. The main reason the authors chose this election was that European themes, being less familiar to Portuguese citizens than national ones, would highlight the need for information about the salient issues as well as the tools for attaining this information, with the websites of political parties and candidates clearly being one of the latter.

Keywords: Campaigning, Elections, European Parliament, Internet, Political Parties

INTRODUCTION: INTERNET AND POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

Despite all the criticism of political parties\(^1\) (Dahl, 1989; Mair, 2003), they remain the backbone of democracy since they are still the only structures able to act as mediators between citizens and the state (Norris, 2001), performing crucial functions such as the recruitment of top politicians and the exercise of the power delegated by citizens (Strom & Muller, 1999). None of these political party functions, however, would be possible without political communication, an interactive process that involves politicians, news media, and the public (Norris, 2004).

According to Norris (2000), there have been three different stages in the development of political communication used by campaigns: they are the pre-modern stage (from the middle of the nineteenth century to the end of the 1950s), the modern stage (from the 1960s through the end of the 1980s) and the post-modern (the 1990s through the present). While in the modern period political communication was clearly dominated by television (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999), the post-modern stage has seen the emergence of

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the Internet as a relevant new player, helping to change the “mass media campaign” into a “hypermedia campaign” (Howard, 2006).

In the United States, the Internet began to play a key role in the 1996 presidential campaign (Clinton vs. Dole), when candidates’ campaign websites became a central, integrated tool (Williams, Trammell, Postelnicu, Landreville, & Martin, 2005); outside the US, the shift toward the Internet took place more or less around the same time (Gibson, Ward, & Lusoli, 2003). The growing importance of the Internet in political parties’ communication has even led some authors to speak of “digital parties” (Norris, 2001) and “cyber-parties” (Margetts, 2006). Nevertheless, it was not until the Obama presidential campaign in 2008 that the Web, and in particular the so-called Web 2.0 (O’Reilly, 2005), took on a decisive and publicly visible role as a prime tool for electoral campaigning (Smith & Rainie, 2008; Smith, 2009).

Obviously, the increased use of the Internet did not lead parties and candidates to discard traditional channels of public communication, particularly mass media tools such as television. In fact, the trend was quite the opposite; the Internet was integrated into the overall process of political communication and the media environment that facilitates this communication.

Diverging both from the “reinforcement theories” (as exemplified by Rheingold, 1993) and the “normalization thesis” or the thesis of “politics as usual” (as exemplified by Margolis and Resnick, 2000), several authors have stressed the novelty of political parties’ online communication and the democratic potential this communication provides for enhancing political trust, pluralism, and participation (Norris, 2003; Curtice & Norris, 2004; Gibson, Ward, & Lusoli, 2003, 2005) as well as the Internet’s capacity for increasing “horizontal communication” that is central to civic interaction (Dahlgren, 2005). Despite this fact, several studies of countries such as the US, the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, Spain, or Ireland—to mention only a few—concluded that most websites for political parties and candidates privileged the informative function over the interactive and participatory functions, regardless of country, size or ideological orientation (Gibson, Margolis, Resnick, & Ward, 2003; Schweitzer, 2005; Sudulich, 2009).

Despite its undeniable importance, this informative function—especially in countries, such as most of those that comprise the European Union, where Internet usage is still low—lacks the ability to reach widespread audiences that characterizes more traditional media like television, newspapers, and radio. Given this limitation, it is no wonder that political parties and candidates, particularly during the “hot periods” of electoral campaigns, try to advertise their websites to the mainstream news media in order to attract the attention of citizens and voters.

A question thus arises: do political parties, candidates, and journalists rely on the Internet and their websites during electoral campaigns? If so, how do they do it? Most of the aforementioned studies, along with many others which studied the informative function of websites (as well as other functions), were mainly focused on issues such as the structure and design of websites or the tools they provided to users, and were hence unable to provide an answer to these questions.

In order to answer these questions, we undertook an exploratory and (primarily) qualitative study of the 2009 EP electoral campaign that took place between May 25 and June 6, 2009 (election day was June 7). In the following sections of this paper, we present the theoretical background of the study, its methodology, our results, and the main conclusions.

THE RELEVANCE OF THE INFORMATION FUNCTION OF POLITICAL WEBSITES DURING ELECTORAL CAMPAIGNS

In spite of all the communicative and interactive tools that Web 2.0 has produced, the informative function of political websites remains a crucial
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