

NEW MEDIA - THE REFORMING FACTOR OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

The paper presents the results of a structural and semantic analysis of the concept of *new political communication* which, according to the theory of the English researcher Brian McNair, includes: political rhetorics, the actions of symbolic communication and some actions with political connotation. The three categories of political communication, defined on the basis of the criterion: *the intention of emitter to the political environment*, were studied and described in order to argue the transformation of the process of transmission-reception of political messages from a unidirectional dialogue into a bidirectional one. This theoretical approach has served to justify the role of the online component of the election campaign as the main innovative element of political marketing model of the XXIst century. The conclusion was that communication between candidates and voters is totally different from that of the political marketing model of the XXth century. Known in scientific literature as *bottom-up communication*, it allows voters to be actively involved in election campaigns thanks to the *input possibilities and feedback* offered by new media: e-mail, SMS, forums, websites, etc.

Keywords: *political communication, new media, spectacularization and personalization of politics, political marketing model, democratic dialogue.*

The comprehensive concept of *political communication* includes traditionally: political rhetorics, some acts of symbolic communication and also actions with political connotation. The

current studies developed in the field are centered, in most cases, on generating specific messages, or on the content and on its effects (NORRIS, 2004). As a corollary of these approaches, it is forwarded the idea on the importance of the intentional nature of political communication and on its definition as “communication that concerns directly to policy” (McNAIR, 2007). Therefore, the intention of the sender towards the political environment serves as a criterion for the classification of political communication in the three categories. The first one includes the communication forms of political actors, applied by them to achieve certain specific objectives. The second category refers to the communication between citizens and political actors, and the third - to the information about the activities of political actors, the indirect dialogue between politician and voter, achieved by means of mass media. The first two types of communication, in Brian McNair’s opinion (McNAIR, 2007), can be characterized by the qualifier *addressed*, unlike the third - called *communication relating to political actors* (Fig.1).

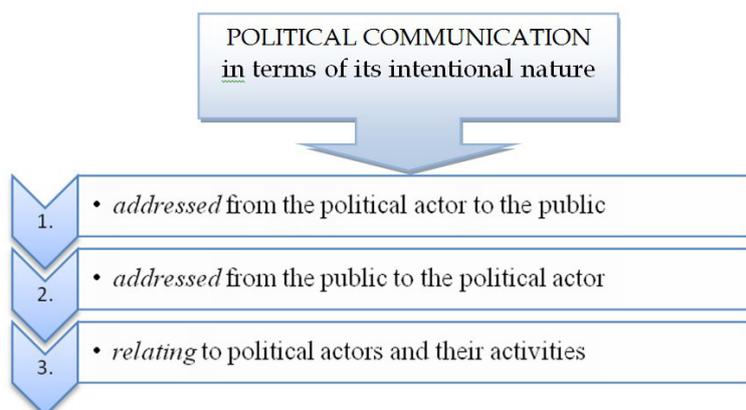


Fig.1. The political communication categories (as mentioned by B. McNair) Source: authors of this paper

In the contemporary society, characterized by an intense use of new media, the fusion of the first two categories of political communication can be observed. More than that, the interactive nature of the new media, the feed-back in real time between sender and receiver, the transparency of information and the increased freedom of expression, facilitated by the emergence and development of new technologies, are the main factors of the transformation of political communication from a unidirectional into a bidirectional discussion.

In most of the states around the world (both with high levels of development and also those qualified as the “Third World”), the new media and global processes of liberalization and decentralization have contributed to the reformation of political communication (MOOG & SLUYTER-BELTRAO, 2001). The intensification of liberalization and commercialization of media product has conditioned the emergence of a number of new trends at the level of national policies – namely changes of the ways in which social actors and their problems are presented by the media, of communication methods applied by political actors, as well as their dialogue with potential voters (of course, influenced by the communication of important structures that have contributed to the foundation of modern democracy - such as political parties and interest groups).

Thus, the communication of political actors by means of mass communication has imposed the respect of some criteria complying with certain formats that emphasize the rapidity of message transmission – namely, spectacularization and personalization of the political discourse. Consequently, the effort to create a positive image, the participation in political negotiation or struggle with competitors rendered the individual political actors (political leaders) and also the collective political actors (governments, political parties, influential groups) to become more “mediatized”.

At present, it is practically impossible to govern without the help of mass media, which “contribute to forming public opinion and are integral part of the modern definition of democracy” (CAYOL, 1997). Thus, the media has progressively introduced important changes in

the functioning of political systems. An example in this case is the personalization of political power (MORARU, 2001), a phenomenon with origins in electoral propaganda, which was manifested firstly by radio (contributing to the creation of the image of leaders like Stalin, Roosevelt, Hitler etc.). Later on, it developed thanks to TV broadcasts, which gave a “particular scale” of this phenomenon (CAYOL, 1997) having, during the election period, the ability to emphasize the human dimension of the candidates. In order to create a “brand image”, the political leaders come to accept the role of a star in a show, being closer to the voters and to their problems and giving them the opportunity to find themselves in the message addressed to the public. On the other hand, the political leader will tend, *via* this role assumed during the election campaign, to position himself at a higher level than the voter, citing “the need of admiration for one who has to carry out very important tasks” (CAYOL, 1997).

The show is one of the principles of effectiveness of the audiovisual means of mass information, allowing the development of the function of entertainment, specific to mass media, and helping increase the audience. As observed, entertainment programs occupy more and more place in the agenda of viewers, being the most broadcasted shows, while the cultural programs or the political, economic and social news are less demanded by the public. Consequently, one of the dilemmas of actual politicians is the acceptance or refusal to be integrated in the world of TV show. In the first case, they risk to become too serious, too archaic and even boring while, in the second case - to be deprived of the control on the quality of the political message addressed to citizens. Nevertheless, the acceptance of the general rule of politics-show has become one of the trends of political communication in most democratic states.

Specialists in the field have mentioned that, over the last fifty years, political communication has experienced different evolution stages (VEDEL, 2009), as due to the high diversification of media information, advanced techniques and methods of media communication, which are becoming more and more sophisticated. The transformation of the relationship between

political actors and citizens is one of the consequences of these changes, and its analysis - one of the ways of understanding the evolution of political communication using mass media.

Broadly speaking, there are two main possibilities of communication between political actors and citizens: direct and indirect. The direct communication occurs when, for transmitting information, one uses a channel on which we have full control. As examples of direct political communication mention should be made of: meetings of candidates with voters, brochures with information on the objectives of political parties, electoral publicity through posters, information posted on the websites of political actors. On the other hand, the indirect (mediated) political communication is performed by political actors using the traditional mass media (print media, radio, television). From the view point of the interaction between political actors and public (political leaders - potential voters), both types of communication present a number of advantages and disadvantages. For example, direct political communication is appreciated by politicians for the possibility of the full control it grants over the content of speech and form of addressed message. To better know the public, his views and preferences, presented in interactive dialogues (discussions with voters, forums, chat rooms on the site) represents an advantage of direct political communication. Nevertheless, the indirect political communication was considered for a long time (due to radio and television) more effective, by its larger audience, by transmitting information at distances of thousands of kilometers, by the official content and media contribution to increasing the credibility of political messages. Certainly, the information disseminated within the main news program will have a greater effect and it will be received even by the citizens less interested in politics. Therefore, indirect political communication can contribute to a better understanding of the messages, the journalists doing an activity similar to that of a translator and making the information clearer and more accessible to the public. In other words, mediators meet their complex role to transmit, explain and comment the messages of politicians, which evidences an increased level of the

professionalization of political communication (NEGRINE, 2008).

In fact, the 20th century was a period of decisive change in the communication between politicians and citizens. The 60s and 70s, through the increasing use of television, opinion polls and political marketing techniques, contributed to the reform of the democratic dialogue. Political communication has been renovated thanks to specific techniques applied, mainly during the pre-election period (personalization and spectacularization). According to specialists, the political debates of 1960 between Richard Nixon and John Kennedy are still considered as a classic example of application of these procedures. At that moment, Richard Nixon had the reputation of "a formidable discussion partner" (experience acquired during his long political career), whereas John Kennedy was considered a dilettante candidate, arriving from business environment. The situation was reversed thanks to four election debates that have demonstrated the ability of the second candidate to hold control over television and his image. In such a way, he became the winner and launched the idea of the prevalence of form (on the detriment of content) in dialogues monitored by voters.

Within a short time, this method was taken over by all European politicians. For example, François Mitterrand, the 21st President of the French Republic (1981-1995), remained in the history of political communication as the political actor who preferred to and applied in electoral practice the method called theatricalization (mentioned by some experts as *spectacularization*). To ensure his victory in the second round of the presidential election of 1981, and to defeat his opponent (Valéry Giscard D'Estaing), François Mitterrand has submitted a number of conditions beneficial to him (as to the decor, furniture shape, distance between guests on the show and TV presenter). The TV show *L'Heure de la vérité* was another obvious example of application of this theatricalization method. For a long time (the first show was in 1982, the last -in 1995), this TV type of performance was the preferred format of TV presentation of all French politicians.

Political rhetorics has evolved by the application of the method called *media-training*, which provides indications, given by professional

journalists, concerning the behavior one has to adopt when filmed by cameras, or even “training sessions” (with a list of questions and possible answers) for the politician. The political discourse, mediated by means of TV broadcasts, was oriented towards ensuring a better comprehension from the part of the audience, inserting in argumentation of responses analogies, metaphors or comparisons. Thus, the channel media rules have imposed new strategy for political communication, such as: credibility, verisimilitude, persuasion technique by modulating one’s voice, calculated movement and spontaneity, all aiming at influencing the voting behavior of electors.

The ever increasing importance of the online environment in political communication imposed two models of the election campaign: a) the 20th century model and b) the 21st century model. In this respect, Bob Dole’s address to the electorate to access his web page represented, for that period, a new element of political communication. It was the first attempt to use the Internet in an election campaign. The result of this message was amazing: two million visitors on his website within 24 hours.

Thus, the 20th century model is characterized by the major role of political advisors in the formulation of messages and strategies, practising of *top-down communication*, namely selection of quite different data about voters for sociological research, the use of television as a primary means of mass communication. In this case, mention should be made of the application of both types of communication with voters: *indirect*, by the audiovisual, and *direct* - based on discussions with voters or promotion, production and dissemination of a large range of materials. The rhythm of information dissemination and reception in the case of political communication, developed according to the 20th century model, is established by the main TV news which send the messages of candidates.

In this way, the election campaigns acquire a certain cadence, dictated by the news programs, starting from early in the morning, continuing at noon, up to the evening news at 22 pm. Consequently, the political leaders know the exact time for the preparation of responses that will serve to respond to the attacks of their competitors.

The communication strategy of this model of political marketing, predominant in the 20th century, is based on past experience and intuition. The opinion polls provide general details about voters, without taking into account their prompt reactions, generated, for example, by the dissemination of publicity, which might influence the voting behavior. In this case it is observed that the legal campaign financing backed up by donors increases the role of voters as passive spectators, whose primary mission is their presence at the vote.

The revolution of online communication, the Internet and the new media determined a change of paradigm. Websites, blogs, social networks are nowadays used as new means of information and communication, which, as in the US presidential election of 2008, may have a decisive role. Thus, the model of 21st century has preserved some elements of its predecessor and added some new ones, producing a significant change in political communication. The political consultants have the same position in defining the objectives and communication strategy of the candidate. Moreover, the practice of framing a whole team of consultants, experts in preparing candidates for their participation in election campaigns is becoming more popular.

The online component of an electoral campaign is the main innovative element that contributed to the reform of political communication. The candidates have immediately understood the importance of employing the team of experts – IT specialists (network administrators, bloggers, social networking administrators, professionals in online publicity) and the impact of communication in the cyberspace. In this case, the communication between political leaders and citizens is totally different from that of the 21st century model. Known as *bottom-up communication*, it allows voters to be actively involved in the election campaigns thanks to the possibilities of input and feedback offered by new media: e-mails, SMS, forums, websites, etc.

The television continues to have its role of media, appreciated by the team of political consultants and candidates, however journalists have more freedom in selecting topics, Internet providing them new sources of inspiration, or which can be cited as: candidate posted information

on his blog, replicas or online publicity on social networks, programs that can be found on the websites of parties. Through the global network and new media, the election campaigns are carried out at rapid pace, *de facto* continuously, 24 hours a day. Intuition and experience are taken into account for the development of an effective communication strategy, but special attention is given to the collection of data about voters. Also, the modification of this model was performed at the level of campaign financing modality: smaller amounts can be donated by accessing of website or by SMS. Thus, thanks to the new media and to the renovation of communication between political actors and public, an effective participation of voters in the campaign became possible.

Professionalization, another variable of change in contemporary political communication, involves "modernization of election campaign practices and political visibility" (BECIU, 2011). This phenomenon emerged in the context of the period marked by the decline of political parties, diminished number of persons wishing to become party members, voters passivity, the paradigm of transition from "loyal voters of a party, with doctrinal sensitivity" to that of a "pragmatic voter without strong ideological convictions" (BECIU, 2011).

Consequently, the emergence of new categories of voters required the development of political communication strategies readapted to the demands of an audience more receptive to persuasive speeches. Under such circumstances, the parties have understood the importance of candidate's ability as politician-communicator and the significance of engaging consultants who would reform the communication within the party by techniques taken over from domain such as marketing, public relations, social psychology.

From a historical perspective, the evolution of political communication includes several stages. The first one corresponds to the period conventionally called *golden age of political parties and print media*. One of its peculiarities is the role of political parties as key sources in initiating political debates. In the election campaign, they occupied a central place, of major importance for the communication with voters. Partisan press was an important factor for assuring the stability

of political parties. In its turn, the electorate may be also described by stability, generated mostly by loyalty to a particular political party. It is the initial phase of affirmation of the status of media as a "fourth power", when the print media was an "independent source of knowledge, which informed people about politics and defended them from the abuses of power" (McNAIR, 2007), having its own ways of intervention in the political sphere. Acting in a partisan manner, most newspapers (both quality press and tabloids) are involved, in this phase, in supporting a favorite party, leading an intense campaign to promote the favorite political party and to fight the opposing parties, by various techniques: critical attitude, denigration etc.

The second stage is generated by the rise of television and by its recognition as the most effective means for transmitting political messages. As a result of broadcasting development, the direct political communication is replaced by mediated communication, marked by significant changes, such as:

- decline of print media and decrease of the selectivity of information sources,
- impartiality and neutrality of television, recognized by political actors as the main forum of discussion,
- emergence, due to the television, of a new audience of political communication campaigns,
- impact of short-term communication by the dissemination of political information within the main political TV news programs.

The third stage of political communication, initiated in the late 20th century, has the following characteristics:

- it launches the postmodern period of election campaigns,
- in electoral campaigns, political consultants occupies a role as important as the candidates,
- political communication takes over many elements of marketing - a consequence imposed by the need of rehabilitation of the social changes, when the voter is a political consumer,
- diversity and continuous improvement of the information technique conditioned media and audience fragmentation,

- the new media are used by politicians as tools to strengthen the positive image and for a rapid transmission of political messages to a large number voters,
- the concept of permanent campaign (potential voters are always targeted by political parties, they are the target of political messages transmitted not only through traditional media, but also through online media) is launched.

In this context, the Internet and new media are considered the most obvious challenges of mediated political communication. Cyberspace has quickly become the preferred medium of political actors. The new media which, by definition, are online media, and which, for performing their communication functions, have to be connected to the Internet, modified the ways of transmitting messages, consequently dividing political observers into optimistic and skeptical ones. Optimism is expressed and confidence that new media will transform and encourage democratic participation. Skeptics argue that new communication technologies are only a natural continuation of traditional media. Therefore, while optimists believe that new media are one of the factors that has changed the concept of political communication, skeptics interpret them as tools for strengthening the current political communication mechanism, without believing that Internet has a chance to change, in future, the electoral landscape.

However, among the advantages of using new media most evidently observed are democratization of the political system by mobilizing the audience in cyberspace, and an increased participation in elections.

The history of online political communication development was directly influenced by the evolution of new technologies. In this respect, two basic stages can be distinguished in the evolution of the application of new media in the political sphere:

1. the stage of political communication, when the website is an alternative means of achieving a direct dialogue between political leaders and citizens (1992-1996);
2. the stage in which political blogs, candidates' official blogs and social networking sites

appear as the new elements of the strategy of communication with the electorate (1997 - till now).

Even if the websites used by politicians in the early 90s had a simplistic architecture and design of brochures were readapted to transmit messages in online environment, leading to unidirectional political communication with a very low level of interactivity, the major advantage of these sites (appreciated, especially in the case of American politicians) consists of Internet capacity to provide access to political information for a large number of citizens.

There followed the stage of creation and integration of blogs in the electoral strategy, including another element of online communication - social media. The practice of online political communication has demonstrated the effectiveness of joint efforts: use of candidates' official blogs, but also the access of militants' blogs. Such practices were taken up by political leaders in Romania, as well as in Moldova. In Moldavian cyberspace, the top of the list of 10 most active political leaders in the blogosphere are Marian Lupu (blog created in 2009), Mihai Ghimpu (blog created in 2010), Igor Dodon (blog created in 2010).

Unlike the information from websites as readapted brochures, the messages posted on the blog are chronologically organized and classified by the topics addressed by the author. Interactivity is the main feature of these forms of new media: the users can send comments, can ask questions and have feedback from politicians.

Social networking sites like *MySpace* (created in 2004), *Facebook* (2004), *Twitter* (2006) opened a new chapter in the evolution of contemporary political communication. Developed for transmitting information to a large number of users, for promoting a company or a public figure, these interactive platforms of online communication are a good way to improve the level of political participation of citizens. Theoretical research concerning the political communication on social networks showed an increasing level of information and political participation of young people. The Presidential elections in the United States, in 2008, argued the success of Barack Obama, who was supported by

a large audience in the digital space, having about 3 million Internet users on his *Facebook* page, while John McCain had only 280 thousand of fans on the same social networking site. Another indicator of the success of the mentioned candidate was the number of friends on social networking site *MySpace*: on Barack Obama's list - 870 000 people, on that of John McCain - 225 000 citizens.

The efficient communication of politicians with voters is, for most of its part, ensured by compliance with the unwritten rules of use of these forms of new media. For example, communication activities on the social networking site *Facebook* include: posting information on personal page, posting comments concerning other users' messages, expressing personal attitude by accessing the option *Like*, transmitting and receiving information in various formats (photos, texts, video images taken from YouTube or from other sources).

The first phase of communication on *Facebook* is to create a personal profile, where the IT user (including political actors) will offer information about himself and which will become public, referring to: education level, field of activity or professional experience, preferences, personal photos.

Politicians, artists, public figures, after obtaining five thousand friends in the list of their social networking sites, have the option to create a promotional page (*Fan Page*), addressed to supporters and specifying that it includes only the information posted by the politician or by his team. Unlike the personal profile, the promotional page can contain an unlimited list of friends and it is equipped with various options for sorting information, use of headings for discussion or creating a space for public debate.

One should also observe that the new media contribute to the development of political participation of social actors in multiple forms. Online access, in real time and at long distances, to political information increases the level of knowledge in the political sphere. Often, communication through certain forms of new media (such as the blogs of candidates or their pages on most popular social networking sites) contributes to the manifestation of interest for politics and an active involvement in the debates of

people from the digital public space. The hypertext (the central structural element of the new media), by its possibility of accessing some interconnected pages, offers to voters a series of information on topics already approached by traditional media (newspapers, radio, television) and a better knowledge of the campaign context. Citizens use the Internet to obtain information and to be involved in supporting a candidate, after which they distribute, through interpersonal discussions, the information about that electoral event.

Even if the Internet is currently only one of the channels of political communication from a most diversified media market, used by voters as traditional means of mass media (for example, television or print media), its massive use in the context of political communication cannot be underestimated.

A similar situation is observed in the case of global network utilization by Moldavian citizens. According to the data presented by the Institute for Public Policy, based on an opinion poll conducted in April 2016, for 41.9% of respondents the Internet is the main source of information, hence it occupies the 2nd place after television (including online TV) - preferred by 83.7% Moldavians. Messages posted in the online environment are daily accessed by 49.6% of users, while 10.4% of them prefer navigate the net a few times a week. As to the credibility of information, approximately 1/2 of Moldavians prefer the TV, while 1/4 of them believe that the messages posted on Internet are true. Analyzed on the basis of the *age category* criterion, the online audience is represented by young people with ages of 18-29 years, which means that 73.0% users qualified the Internet as the most important source of information (CBS Axa, 2016). Therefore, transition from traditional journalistic products to the online sources and social media is a specific tendency for young people (HARPER, 2010).

Consequently, it is natural to suppose that the developments in the era of new information and communication technology will produce significant changes not only in the manner messages are received by the audience, but also in terms of the manifestation of political actors and, in general, thus changing the way of doing politics.

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