MEDIA IN ELECTION PROCESSES

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ABSTRACT:

The politician does not want to be just a subject exposed to the political arena any longer, who is becoming well-known and recognizable thanks to political advertising. The politician is getting more active in the field of communication processes aimed at creating a new image of the politician, whom the voters know not just from the traditional media but also from their direct contact with the environment and passing his or her views on many subjects e.g. politics, social issues or economy. At the same time, political marketing processes are gradually replaced by political public relations processes, and the one-way direction of the message, which is characteristic of marketing communication, seems to be systematically replaced by the two-way communication, which is typical for the public relations processes. Progressing development of the social media, such as Internet blogs, Facebook, Twitter, as well as the development of political public relations, influence the changes in both: perceiving the role of the traditional media in the election processes and political communication and in the co-relation between the traditional media and the social media. Social media are more likely to be regarded as being not only complementary to the traditional media, or the brand-new communication tool, but even being an alternative to the traditional media.

KEY WORDS:

facebook, political communication, political campaign, social media, political public relations

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Introduction

In the view of social perception, the development of political public relations changes the view of the political world. Politicians are becoming much more active creators of public life; their environment is getting more professional due to the following factors: co-operation with the media, application of modern tools, such as the Internet, as well as creation of the desired relation: politician-environment. This process is sometimes called "plebiscitization" of politics itself as well as of political communication (more and more frequently the notions of politics and communication are regarded as the same[1]). Politicians are aware of the importance of popularity so in the case of politics two areas can be identified – the first one: real, where challenges concerning problem solving are realised and the second one: paying attention to image, popularity, being accepted by the environment; the closest – politicians from the same party and the widely understood environment.[2] According to E. Nowak, plebiscitization is connected with a politician's need for permanent legitimization of power which is done by the media in the non-election periods. So in fact this plebiscitization is based on communication competencies of a politician.[3]

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1   Already in mid 1960s K.W. Deutsch claimed that politics is first and foremost the issue of communicating. K.W. Deutsch, The Nerves of Government. Model of Political Communication and Control, The Free Press, New York, 1963
2   H. M. Kepplinger, Disassembly of Politics in Information Society, Wyd. UJ, Kraków 2007, p. 130
3   E. Nowak, Plebiscitization of politics – the media and public opinion as sources of legitimization of power, in Power and Political

The politician does not want to be just a subject exposed to the political arena any longer, who is becoming well-known and recognizable thanks to political advertising. The politician is getting more active in the field of communication processes aimed at creating a new image of the politician, whom the voters know not just from the traditional media but also from their direct contact with the environment and passing his or her views on many subjects e.g. politics, social issues or economy. At the same time, political marketing processes are gradually replaced by political public relations processes, and the one-way direction of the message, which is characteristic of marketing communication, seems to be systematically replaced by the two-way communication, which is typical for the public relations processes.

The phenomenon of gradual substitution of political marketing tools with communication with voters also seems to be facilitated by the implemented and planned changes in law, restricting the possibility of using political advertising or trying to force politicians to take part in expert debates, including popularising direct meetings with voters. Such works are currently carried out in Poland, aimed at focusing on education and engagement of citizens in political debate and not only at simple provision of messages, often one-way, presented in a way that does not require any preparation from the recipients. Such a message, what can be noticed and emphasised, is easy to receive and often built on the principle of simplifications and populist statements. At the same time it eliminates substantive messages from political debate. Progressing development of the social media, such as the Internet blogs, Facebook, Twitter, as well as the development of political public relations, influences the changes in both: perceiving the role of the traditional media in the election processes and political communication and in the co-relation between the traditional media and the social media. Social media are more likely to be regarded as being not only complementary to the traditional media, or the brand-new communication tool, but even being the alternative to the traditional media.

„New" and „old" media in election processes

In the election processes leaders are promoted. Media messages directed at voters are focused on image messaging and are often not substantive while an ideal message from the point of view of the traditional media contains a strong message confronting polarised views, best expressed with emotional undertones. And this process makes promotion via media equally important individually - for particular politicians, as well as collectively – for political parties. The media are thought to exercise power, known before as "the fourth estate", today regarded as equal to the executive and legislature.[4] By distinguishing forms of media power: discourse, access and means, attention is paid to the fact that the media create opinions (discourse), include or exclude subjects or matters from the public arena (access) and influence politicians directly or make influence possible for stakeholders.[5]In this way traditional media actually decide about what is important for recipients (topics); who is to talk about this (people, parties, stakeholders) and in what context certain matters should be discussed. These criteria differentiate traditional media from social media. Traditional media promote the leaders by presenting them to wide audiences, inviting to debates taking place in the media, asking for their opinions; however, the social media allow the leaders to exist, independently of the traditional media, by boosting the message which is passed to the environment. And the question is, if it is enough for political leaders to exist only in the social media, or if they treat the new media as the area of existence needed to potentially appear in the traditional media. Philips E. Converse claims that communication directed towards the citizens develops as a result of technological advances, which results in changing the gravity of interest placed on the communication channels. And as Converse writes, political blogs, which were not known a few years ago, today have become a huge industry of political communication, leading to violent decline of prime-time evening news programs.[6]

However, Holli A. Semetko points out, quoting Crampton, that political blogs – unknown in the 1990`s, are a "huge Internet industry" today, being a challenge for the traditional news media. Nevertheless, in the context of these theories there is a question to be asked, if the existence of the politician in the social media during the election process is of the same strong dimension as in the traditional media, especially television. And according to the further statement of Semetko: "The Germans represent a relatively higher level of both: reading the newspapers and using the Internet than many other EU countries, however, most of the Germans similarly to the citizens of other EU countries list TV news as the basic source of information about political issues during the election time. /.../ The research points out that TV news programs in Germany are less focused on essential matters or political decisions, and are much more concentrated on the personality and the character features of the political leaders, as well as on their chances during the election."[7]

H. Jenkins shares this opinion, citing Trippi (a campaign manager for e.g. John Kerry) saying that "Candidates create their election bases on the Internet but they need television to win the election. It is the difference between "push" media (where the content is delivered to the consumer whether they want it or not) and "pull" media (where you have to actively look for information on a given subject). The Internet reaches the most committed, television – the undecided."[8]

However, an interesting co-relation between the traditional and the Internet media was observed also in Poland, where – especially during the election processes the politicians strive to be visible in the traditional media, especially TV, while the existence in the Internet media is being treated as a tool enabling them to exist in the traditional media. In the traditional media the party leaders` posts on political blogs are becoming the subject of analyses (however, on condition that their content is highly tabloidized or personalized). And at the same time, the message passed by both the Internet and the social media is treated as the attempt to place an original, controversial or humorous message in the traditional media. Politicians still do not have a consistent and well thought out existence in the social media, treating it as the aim in itself and not a tool to start existence in traditional media.

The traditional media, which nowadays seem to be focused on two main processes: first - access to the news together with the fight for "juicy" issues, and second – entertainment, and at the same time the traditional media stay away from any profound political analysis or political debates – treating them as the field where various political options and political opinions can clash. It also seems that the Internet media are treated by the politicians in the same way, which means – not just as the tool to hold a dialogue with the society, but rather as the tool to influence this society. Social media, however, respond to the serious political challenge and support the promotion of the leaders, being the candidates in the election process, but not directly the political parties themselves. Personalization of politics in democratic societies, resulting from the role of political and party leaders is also connected with the phenomenon of priming as a process of evaluation of political leaders by voters, based on their performance in issues the voters deem important. This means that the leaders may directly appeal to voters, aiming at a personal mandate which emphasises their ability to create politics.[9] Finally, social media - thanks to the new media – can, which is however not popular political behaviour, activate social movements, which may change the citizens` attitudes also the ones in the election processes. Nowadays, nobody believes that the access to the "new" media via the Internet lets the regime systems last as stable ones. To confirm these theses the example of Tunisia or Egypt should be given, where one of the first actions in fighting social riot was cutting off the access to the Internet and social media (Twitter, Facebook). The reason for riots in Tunisia, according to the analysts, which in turn gave rise to riots in Egypt was information revealed by Wikileaks about financial means possessed by the President of Tunisia. Another interesting phenomenon protecting the regime system was that when riots in Tunisia and Egypt broke out, Chinese authorities blocked keywords that could provide Chinese people with wider knowledge about these events in search engines and at the onset of February riots in Libya the Internet was immediately disconnected. These examples prove that even regime leaders start to be aware of the necessity of taking into consideration the information passed on through the Internet and social media.

Leadership in Democracy, ed. by E. Nowak, D. Litwin-Lewandowska, Wyd. Uniwersytetu M. Curie-Skłodowskiej, Lublin 2010, pp. 36-37
4   W. Schulz, Political communication. Political concepts and results of empirical research into mass media in politics, Wyd. Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków 2006.
5   E. Nowak, op. cit. p. 41
6   P.E. Converse, Perspectives on Mass Belief Systems and Communication, in: Political behavior, R. J. Dalton, H-D. Klingemann eds., Wyd. Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2010, p. 196

7   H.A. Semetko, Political communication, in: Political behavior, R. J. Dalton, H-D. Klingemann eds., Wyd. Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2010, pp. 161-163
8   H. Jenkins, Convergence Culture. Where old and new media collide, Wyd. Akademicki i Profesjonalne, Warszawa 2001, p. 207
9   More about personalization of politics can be found in I. McAllister, The Personalization of Politics, in Political behavior vol. 2, Wyd. Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2010, pp. 173

Jan van Dijk points out that during the last 20 years the democratic potential of the new media, which should strengthen the citizens` position and let the direct democracy to be re-born allowing widespread participation, has been praised. Van Dijk writes: "Digital democracy enables better and detailed information on political processes and government policies, running public debate on-line as well as higher direct participation of the citizens in the decision-making process."[10]

A similar opinion is shared by Castells who points out the use of e-mail as a tool of political propaganda – a tool of mass dissemination of directed political message.[11] But Castells also points out using other Internet communication tools in election processes – creating websites by the candidates but also attempts at activating, particularly local communities, in the Internet debate around local problems, what besides creating a platform for exchanging opinions, also serves self-organization of citizens and creating some communities, maybe weak but their activity is a form of aggregating local social capital.[12]

Transferring Castells` opinions to Polish local conditions, we may point out different initiatives which were created for the purposes of the local election campaign run in 2010 in the most popular social medium in Poland - Facebook. For example in Tychy (a city of 130,000 residents in Silesia) a group called "Local Election 2010 in Tychy" was formed, where election materials of all candidates for the Mayor and to the City Council were placed. Publication of materials by electoral committees led others, often the representatives of other electoral committees, to comment. An outsider could not help thinking that the group was formed for local politicians and their surroundings who via the created group implemented one of the aspects of the election campaign – a clash of people gathered around candidates, sometimes even with attention paid to substantive message.[13] The group in Tychy had 192 people, which should be regarded as small in a city with over 100 thousand residents. It is also worth noting that the group ceased to exist a few months after the election, and the potential platform for debate was closed. Facebook groups were also created in other cities and their aim was either to promote local politicians or to discuss local issues connected with the election campaign, or they drew people opposed to local politicians.

Especially in the election processes the social media are also used to promote the politicians, including the local ones, belonging to the party thanks to the leaders of these political parties. The traditional media do not allow this possibility due to the topics chosen by the editorial staff and later issued, so regarded as important by the journalists themselves, as well as the ability of issuing everything, which according to the politicians is vital and should be passed to the public opinion. Social media do not have limitations like air time, volume of press or the choice of issues which seem to be important for the traditional media. What is more, the social media reach directly the people concerned. Therefore, presentation of a politician who is unknown to his voters, by one of the party leaders, creates the possibility of reaching directly the public opinion, with the message additionally boosted by the support given by the leader of the party. Leaders of political parties and well-known politicians usually have significant numbers of users of the particular portal as friends – people who are interested in having this politician in their own "circle-of-friends", which firstly enables them to receive all the information placed by the politician or the person being in charge of the account, and secondly – to comment on the information. Polish politicians with Facebook profiles include: Lech Wałęsa – 2,722 friends, Władysław Bartoszewski – 13,427 friends, Grzegorz Napieralski (leader of Polish left-wing party) – 4,232 friends, Donald Tusk (Prime Minister of Poland) – 2,081 friends, Róża Thun (MEP) – 2,158 friends. Politicians from other countries also have Facebook accounts e.g.: President of the US – Barack Obama - 15,968,155 friends, who during the recent election for the Congress in 2010 was supporting the Democrats via his profile, as well as encouraging voters to participate in the election and cast the vote for the Democrats. Possessing social media profiles by politicians and well-known people who support particular political groups is on one hand promotion for the politicians belonging to the political party, and on the other hand the attempt to hold a dialogue with the environment.

The analysis of the target group of the traditional media: the press, radio and television, depends on various criteria such as: age, access to the particular type of medium and interests. Mainly, the changes among the addressees of the traditional media affect essentially the press, while the electronic media – mainly the television, do not notice any vital changes if we take into consideration the interest in the delivered information via this medium, and as van Dijk writes: "the television still plays a much more crucial role in the political life, than the Internet, however, considering the young voters – the net is of equal importance as the old media."[14]

Jenkins writes about a new political culture, describing it as an element of popular culture, directed by the principles of two media systems – a commercial one, reaching wide audiences and the other – a bottom-up one, reaching selected audiences.[15] These two media systems act jointly - Trippi describing how he obtained money for the campaign says that he was talking to people live on the radio and at the same time people listening to him were using the Internet, logging in and making donations for the campaign. These activities, when repeated, even made it possible to estimate amounts that will be paid in for the campaign.[16]

Diversification of channels of transferring information is important because it becomes possible for larger numbers and more diverse social groups to speak. Van Dijk, who was mentioned before, points to the choice and at the same time access to certain channels due to age – younger - the Internet, older - the television. Jenkins, on the other hand, points to the dependence of a wide group of recipients and bottom-up activation, measured with the number of people who give donations to support a given candidate.

Access to the wide range of information, both on the Internet and in the traditional media, can, however, influence the decision-making process in various ways. It was Marshall McLuhan who has already mentioned the avalanche of information[17], the problem of being over-informed, which does not positively influence the rational decision-making process, and very often it is discouraging for the recipients. And similar problem is connected with the existence on the net, and additionally – the availability of information coming from the traditional media, where information must be selected from a huge amount of all accessible sources, and what is more, information must be regarded as vital enough to be the base of the decision taken. According to John Street: „gaining larger amounts of data does not necessarily have a positive impact on the taken decision, the basis of which is always the estimation of a particular situation, and the excess of information can be disturbing."[18] However, the fact which should be stressed is that the media which exist exclusively on the Internet (Internet portals) select the information according to e.g.: subject-matter of the portal, and they search the source websites of various institutions, or they carry out some actions by their own journalists concerning the information characteristic of the theme of a particular portal. The model example can be the portal wikileaks.com issuing various source documents, confirming particular policies run by the people in power and their administration or international corporations. Information published on wikileaks.com is then also presented by traditional media (press or television).

One of the vital elements stressing the importance of the social media is their role in increasing participation of people in the political debate - the direct exchange of political views. The research run so far and the ones presented by e.g. Van Dijk, however, have not confirmed the thesis that the social media together with the Internet ensure higher participation in the debate or being inter-active. Usually, participation in the discussion on a particular subject aims at taking advantage of presenting one`s point of view on a definite matter, or referring to the views presented by different participants in the discussion. However, it does not influence the element, which is crucial in the debates run in a traditional way – meaning the talk in the real world, and which is the will of gaining the agreement, formulating the conclusions, exchanging the views together with the interaction at the same time and place. Nevertheless, the researchers of this issue – i.e. the Internet activity, are pointing out that the unusually crucial role of the Internet media and discussion forums should be stated, consisting in activation of people, ability to create political communities in the future, which may result in creating an alternative to current

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10   J. van Dijk, Social aspects of new media, Wyd. Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2010, p. 138
11   M. Castells, The Network Society, Wyd. Naukowe PWN, 2010, p. 391
12   Ibid., pp. 389 and 391
13   This aspect of political communication, which is concentrated on the message itself coming from one political option to another, also in order to widen access to information, is tackled by W. Schulz, op. cit. pp. 7, at the same time showing that political decision makers use information available in the media more often than average citizens. So it should be admitted that political communication is also addressed at political opponents and supporters, not only the media and public opinion.

14   J. van Dijk, op. cit. p. 150
15   H. Jenkins, op. cit., p. 205
16   J. Trippi, The Revolution Will Not Be Televised: Democracy, The Internet, and the Overthrow of Everything, HarperCollins, NYC 2004, p. 4
17   M. McLuhan, Understanding Media, The Extensions of Man, London 1987.
18   J, Street, Remote control? Politics, democracy and "electronic democracy", European Journal of Communication, 12, 1997, pp. 27-42.

perception of politics, community and election processes. The same argument is given by Castells when he writes that the Internet is a tool for creating and fostering social connections, where communication facilitates casual discussion, informing local public opinion and democratic control.[19]

The highest achievement of the Internet as well as the social media can be partial independence from the traditional media and the information passed by them. Nowadays, journalists of the traditional media are somehow dependent on the Internet and social media, which both allow gaining the information, which either directly or after processing are the source of the information presented via the traditional media. However, simultaneously, taking advantage of the Internet and the source information presented on Internet websites of particular institutions, can be fulfilled by everyone who is able to use the Internet, and may find the information on their own. So, analyzing the matter, only in the field of politics, the Internet is profitable for various subjects: political parties or their leaders, public administration – which accomplishes the duty on the governmental level or self-governing level, as well as being lucrative for numerous formal and non-formal organizations, which deal with political issues. Therefore, all these subjects - thanks to their Internet websites, profiles on social portals, blogs or by creating and monitoring the forums on which the public debate takes place - can realize their own information policies, independent of the co-operation with the traditional media.

The success of political communication in election processes, run through the mediation of the social media, i.e. the Internet, depends on the digital exclusion – concerning particular communities, both on a national and regional scale. In order to use the social media, two conditions should be fulfilled: access to the Internet and the skills enabling people to take advantage of the possibilities offered by both the Internet and the social media. These two arguments are of key importance for the popularity of the social media.

However, we should not ignore the fact that the social media are used as a place for issuing the information coming from the traditional media, which by possessing their own Internet websites as well as own profiles are also promoting the issues published in their own media or on the Internet portals. Therefore, because of the politicians and their advisors or spin doctors, during the election processes the Internet and the new media are an important tool used to enhance activity and exert influence on the environment by delivering source information directly to the public opinion. However, introducing politics into the net also creates various possibilities for voters – people, social groups or social movements – to inform about their claims and to exert influence on politicians and their administration. It is becoming a much more common practice to protest on the net against particular policies or practices. An example may be Tunisia or Egypt, where the protests expressed on the Internet turned into real social riots, resulting in bringing down long ruling politicians. Facebook or Twitter – social media enabled channelling of common social opinions, in each country, that translated into a real political change.

According to the opinion of researchers cited by Jan van Dijk[20], so far it has not been agreed that there is any dependence pointing that appearing and being active in the social media may be reflected in the level of involvement in politics. Another matter is that there is a possibility of gaining the information straight from the source, as well as the possibility of swift passing the information to others. Additionally, the researchers point out that just searching for the information concerning political issues, political parties or candidates is much more popular than participation in discussions, or taking into account the candidates – running the election campaign on the net. As van Dijk and the researchers cited by him point out: „In the United States of America and most other countries where proper research was carried out, in the late 1990`s, approximately 10-20% of Internet users were somehow involved into some kind of political activity. Much more Internet users use political news services and in the year 2002 their number in the USA reached 46 million people, or in other words – they constituted 39.4% of all Internet users. In the Netherlands 2 million people out of 7 million voters, who went to the ballot box in 2002, took advantage of the Internet election guide /.../. The researchers noticed, however, that new forms of getting information and being active in politics were used more often by well-educated people, who even previously were involved in political matters."[21]

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19   M. Castells, op. cit., pp. 388
20   J.van Dijk, op. cit., p. 153
21   Ibid., pp. 153-154

Summary

It should be expected that during the next few years the number of Internet and social media users will be growing. Simultaneously, taking into consideration the fact that traditional media, especially the press, will be gradually entering the net, it should be expected that the requirements towards the journalists will be changing. What will be of high importance is the quickness in reaching the information, ability to search for information at its source, and what is even more vital, ability to pass the information together with the interpretation of the message, which will explain the interest in the information itself. Wide access to information issued on Internet sites is not a technical problem; the problem may rather be connected with understanding the information as well as with lack of ability to take advantage of it. At the same time, the journalists will be required to justify the importance of the information which they have chosen from the "avalanche of information" and present as especially crucial. Another matter will also be the necessity to confront information coming from various sources and it will be done by journalists. It seems that it will be the sort of expectations expressed by the users of various Internet media, who on individually chosen theme-portals will be looking for filtered information enriched by analyses, but what is also possible – they will expect the possibility of running the debate over the presented issue. That is why, a higher level of theme professionalization should be expected on Internet portals, also in the field of political communication, presentation of political standpoints by politicians who run their blogs on the chosen portals, or take part in on-line debates. Undoubtedly, further development of the social media cannot be denied, as well as taking advantage of them in political communication. So-far, researchers do not confirm that the Internet or social media have influence on the rise of interest in politics or taking active participation in it. Moreover, it was pointed out that in the future there will be a possibility of negative influence on running the political debate via social media, which means a simplified and superficial debate. However, at the same time, according to analyses, social media will be an inceasingly more important and widespread tool in the process of communicating political information.

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