THE BLOG – POLITICAL PR TOOL IN THE 2009 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTORAL CAMPAIGN

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Abstract: The article *The blog – political PR tool in the 2009 presidential electoral campaign* is the outcome of monitoring the blogs of the 12 candidates during the 2009 presidential elections. This article presents the results of the research *Electoral Communication in Romania after 1989. Old and New Technologies in Presidential Campaigns,* which is part of the post-doctoral program POSDRU/89/1.5/S/62259, applied social, human and political sciences. *Post-doctoral training program and post-doctoral research scholarships in the field of the social, human and political sciences.* The research hypothesis was that populists paid more attention to new media. The radicals understood better the advantages of online communication, so they used the blog for image improvement. I monitored whether the speech of the blogger politicians aimed to promote a certain self-image (by conveying electoral messages) or to depict a bad image of the competitors (attacking the opponents' statements). I also inventoried the candidates' replies to the readers' comments.

Keywords: blog, presidential campaign, electoral campaign, candidate

1. Theoretical considerations

Blogs are devices for image creation (Aparaschivei, 2009:100). It is not sufficient for a politician to have a blog for his image to be substantially improved. Having a personal communication platform cannot harm anyone, especially as the politician does not always have access to mass-media, so the only means of communication through which he or she can express an opinion is the blog.

A politician's image promotion is created either through his/her own means, or through mass-media (Rus, 2006:12). In the case of the politician's own means, the PR team control over the message is complete and the politician can promote whichever message he/she wishes. This is the case of paid advertising. When the promotion is done via mass-media, the PR team control decreases; the important message in this case is the one that mass-media intend to promote.

If we define PR as *unpaid publicity* (Kaid, Holtz-Bacha, 2006:3-6), then there should not be any candidate who is not using the blog as an instrument for unpaid publicity. Lynda Kee Kaid and Christina Holtz-Bacha (2006) show that unpaid publicity is obtained through news, reports, interviews, editorials, and chronicles about the political candidates. During the non-electoral periods, the political actors communicate through *Free media (uncontrolled media).*

Paid media are controlled media in the sense that the candidate-politicians or the parties pay for the advertisements in which they can control the electoral message. However, the candidates cannot have absolute control over the news and reports called free media or uncontrolled media.

Although the advertising message from the electoral video clip is controlled by the politicians, electoral advertising involves a series of disadvantages. Brian McNair (2007:169) notices that the advertising message is perceived by its receiver as being if not necessarily "propagandistic" (in the negative sense of the term), then at least biased. Regardless of whether they like or dislike the message, the audience understands it is a politically charged message, reflecting the interests, ideas and values of the one who is promoting it. Hence, the efficiency of political advertising as a persuasion means will always be limited. Understanding that the message is biased, the reader, TV viewer or radio listener can distance oneself from it – to resist and reject it.

This is the reason why McNair (2007:170) underlines that political actors have come to believe in the importance that the "free means of communication" can have in achieving their objectives, as opposed to the "paid alternatives". "Free means of communication" define those communication spaces and channels where politicians benefit of exposure without having to pay the mass-media for this privilege. It is what Lynda Lee Kaid and Christina Holtz-Bacha call unpaid publicity or uncontrolled media.

The blog is a form of unpaid publicity and free media through which politicians are trying to control/influence the mass-media traditional agenda. Flaviu Rus (2006: 14-15) shows that the political communication team tackles the following political PR strategies: the strategy of projecting a profile of the political actor, the strategy of bringing something to the attention of the public opinion, the strategy of creating intra-systemic trust in the promoted political actor, and of increasing the self-confidence of the political actor.

Promotion through mass-media (controlled media) can be made as product placement or as paid advertising. Promotion by the politician's own means consists in the advertising created through the events, conferences and press materials developed by the politician or the party. Product placement consists in placing a product or service in a radio or TV show for an amount of money. Paid advertising materializes based on advertising contracts through which, for an amount of money, the newspapers publish a certain image, a print ad or an article about the political actor, on the page that the PR team chooses and as many times as the team contracts it. Political advertising has to follow legal terms and conditions on radio and TV, but it is far less restrictive on the internet. The published or broadcasted materials (articles, print ads, photos, audio or video clips, web banners) are created under the careful coordination of the political PR team and are composed of the exact messages that the team intends to convey to the public.

Image promotion through press conferences or other media events is an efficient method, but has the disadvantage that, in such situations, the content (what is published or broadcasted) is decided upon by the journalists. Regarding the promotion through the politician's own means, offline PR can use mobile caravans, informative flyers, posters, banners, different sizes balloons, badges, pennants, flags, t-shirts, caps, lighters, matches, pens, car flavors, calendars, leaflets, brochures, open letters,

attending different events, press releases, meetings with the electors etc. Online PR uses the email, blog, website, video-sharing channels, user generated content websites (YouTube) and social networks.

The political PR adviser can counsel the politician for an amount of money established in a contract, or for promoting common values, when the adviser sympathizes with the ideology of the counseled party (Rus, 2006:24). Except for the advisers who do political PR as volunteers, because they support the ideology of that party, the access to free media exposure involves certain costs. To obtain free publicity, the party requires a more or less specialized department of "advisers on PR issues", that has to be paid by the party. Creating or developing events and contexts through which politicians can get access to free media can cost time and money.

2. Research framework

2.1 Research objectives

The article intended to analyze the candidates' attitude towards their own campaign and towards the competitors' campaigns and to identify the image promoted by each of the blogger candidates in the 2009 presidential elections. I analyzed the blog posts made before and during the electoral campaign (October-November 2009). My aim was to find in what ways the blogs were used by the candidates: to improve their political image, to promote a personal or a professional image, for rational debates, or for "Balcanic quarrels" (Sălcudeanu, 2009:24).

In the analysis of the 2009 presidential election campaign I monitored whether the Romanian politicians used the blog as a communication tool. The aim of the research was to provide an analysis of the primary image promoted through blogs by the candidates.

2.2 Research hypothesis

My post-doctoral research *Electoral Communication in Romania after 1989. Old and New Technologies in Presidential Campaigns*, which is part of the post-doctoral program POSDRU/89/1.5/S/62259, presents how the Romanian presidential candidates used the new technologies (user generated content sites, blogs and social-media marketing) and how online communication was used as a tool for promoting parties and political candidates. My post-doctoral research intends to establish which of the Moderate and Radical candidates use the new tools of communication more often in their electoral campaigns.

My previous research on the 2004 online presidential campaign entitled *Online Negative Campaign in the 2004 Romanian Presidential Elections* (Momoc, 2010) showed that web 2.0 technologies, such as user generated content sites, had been used for mocking or attacking the competitors; the most active candidates conducted negative political campaigns. Therefore, the hypothesis for *The blog – political PR tool in the 2009 presidential electoral campaign* was that the blog was used in 2009 as a

tool for attacking the competitors (negative campaign) and as an interactive tool of communication (web 2.0)

The research hypothesis for the article *The blog – political PR tool in the 2009 presidential electoral campaign* was that radical politicians are more attentive to blog communication and are trying to take advantage of the PR opportunities that this online platform offers during a campaign.

2.3 Research sample

This research is the result of monitoring the October and November posts in the 2009 presidential candidates' blogs. The research period is January 15th – March 28th 2011.

I intended to use the blogs of all the 12 candidates as empirical data, but I could not analyze some of the blogs because Ovidiu Iane (Romanian Ecologist Party) deactivated his blog and Constantin Ninel Potârcă (independent candidate from Roma minority) did not have a blog.

Electoral campaign websites of the President Traian Băsescu and of Ovidiu Iane are no longer online, they could not be found. The blog of Romania Mare Party candidate, Corneliu Vadim Tudor (a nationalist leader), and the blog of the Bucharest Mayor Sorin Oprescu are closed, and the archive of their blogs could not be found. For a short period of time, Mircea Geoană's blog has also been closed, but the blog became active again and it is currently online. The winner of the electoral competition never had a blog: for his 2004 and 2009 campaigns, Traian Băsescu had dedicated websites with many web 2.0 elements. After each campaign, he deactivated these websites.

2.4 Research method

To achieve my scientific objectives, I used two kinds of methods: *Content analysis* and *image analysis*. My empirical research started from the following questions:

1) Did the candidate use the blog to promote his campaign themes, to mobilize the electors to the poll, or to attack the counter-candidates and denigrate his opponents?

2) What kind of self-image did the politician promote (political, personal or professional)?

For *Content analysis*, I monitored the blogger's speech in his posts: whenever the post was about himself, his campaign, his political party, I classified his attitude as being self-centered and positive. If the post was about the political competitors, if he criticized the other candidates, or if he attacked the Government, the Presidency or other, his attitude was classified as negative.

I used the qualitative method of Content analysis as explained by Alex Mucchielli (2002:38-48). The steps in Content analysis are Encoding, Categorization and Establishing the relationships (or Data interpretation).

Encoding aims to extract the essential of the testimony posted on the blog by using the blog post key-words. Any qualitative analysis condenses continuous and abundant data. This means that the key-words or expressions that summarize the phrases of interest must be very accurate and true to the blog testimony. By simply reading the key-words, an uninformed reader should be able to reconstitute the blog testimony without having to read it. For Encoding, the questions we use are "What do we have here? What is this about?" The answers to these questions become key-words or summarizing expressions.

The Categorization is illustrated by transposing the key-words into concepts. A category is a word that abstractly defines a cultural, social or psychological phenomenon as it is perceived in a data corpus. The category leads to theoretic concepts, which establish the relationships between the categories.

The expression "Romanian village" is a code. The expression "Agricultural policy", for the same extract, is a category. The first expression is extracted from a post on Mircea Geoană's blog and we may have to return to this essential element along our analysis. The second expression is richer, more evocative; this is why it is strong.

Establishing the relationship refers to the blogger candidate attitude (favorable or unfavorable) regarding the theme he is debating ("Agricultural policy"), and also to the attitude (negative or positive) that he has related to the key-words he is using.

For the blog promoted *Image analysis* I have used the research method elaborated by Bogdan Halic and Ion Chiciudean in order to reveal the image direction that the candidate was following in the presidential campaign. In the case of blog communication, the results of the study consist in gross data and the offered information has a small degree of relevance compared to the image that actually reached the public. When I decided to analyze the politicians' blogs, I did not intend to identify the image of the politician as it reached to its blog reading audience, but I wanted to discover the type of image that the politicians promote through the blogs during the electoral campaign.

As opposed to content analysis, Image analysis operates with a set of constantly defined elements, called image markers. To be operational, the image markers have to be relevant for the analyzed image, have to be measurable in a binary quantification system (positive/negative), and, when decomposed in a number of image sub-markers, they have to cover a certain dimension of the image that will be analyzed.

In order to have a viable image markers system, each marker has to be decomposed into sub-markers. The image sub-markers are those image elements that compose the image marker and that allow the image to be measured. For the image sub-markers to be operational, they have to be formulated very clearly.

In the Image analysis of the presidential candidates' blogs, the recording unit represents the numbering unit. The numbering units represent elements through which

the recording units (key-words) and the context units (the blog post) are quantitatively expressed. The most frequently used numbering unit is the image sub-marker (key-word). The references found in each image sub-marker will be reported to the reference system-image marker, in order to discover the share (as percentage) that each image marker has in the reference system.

An image profile represents the graphic expression of the calculated value of the image elements. The image profile is built by establishing the number of times each image marker/sub-marker was referred to.

The image analysis (the Halic and Chiciudean method was also used by Paul Aparaschivei in Guţu Dorina. 2009. *Facebook, bloguri şi politică,* Bucharest: Tritonic) was used in order to establish the type of image promoted by the politicians during presidential election campaigns.

The image analysis was based on the following indicators (image markers): the political dimension, the human or personal dimension and the professional dimension. Image analysis is referring to the image that the candidate wanted to impose or to transmit to the public.

Image analysis consists in the following image markers: political dimension (when the post/comments were about the political party, political platform, economical measures, financial crisis, or about his campaign), professional dimension (post/comments about his profession, his experience, and his career), human or personal dimension (about leisure, family, friends, hobbies).

Each item (image marker) was subdivided into sub-indicators – for example, the professional dimension was subdivided into transparency, adequate leadership style, crisis management abilities; the political dimension was subdivided into campaign themes, the party solutions for the economic crisis, attacks against the counter-candidates.

The results showed that the political dimension was the main indicator emphasized by the Romanian presidential candidates in their blog communication, the personal and especially the professional dimensions were scarcely approached.

3.   Discussion of results: The Blog as Political PR Tool

The candidate of the National Liberal Party, Crin Antonescu, used the blog URL   http://www.crinantonescu.ro/Blog/CrinAntonescu.html   and   received   1.945.831 votes, according to the Central Electoral Bureau, reaching the third place. The candidate of the Social Democratic Party, Mircea Geoană, used the blog URL http://www.mirceageoana.ro/blog and received 3.027.838 votes in the first ballot.

Kelemen Hunor, from the Alliance of the Democratic Hungarians, used the blog   URL   http://www.kelemenhunor.ro/blogro/   and   the   campaign   website http://www.kelemenhunor.ro/candidatlapresedintie/, and won 372.764 votes.

As for the independent candidate Sorin Oprescu, he has a blog that was probably developed by a fan, http://sorinoprescu.wordpress.com/ (active, but year

2009 misses from the archive), and also a blog belonging to some of his supporting fans, http://sorinmirceaoprescu.wordpress.com/ (last post dates from May 2008). Oprescu won 309.764 votes.

The candidate of the New Generation Party, populist George Becali, had a blog with a single post and won 186.390 votes: http://www.georgebecali.ro/blog/. During the campaign he had two dedicated pages – it is a special case, in which the blog is formatted as a two pages website, on Wordpress platform. His old website (a page with a minimal presentation, plus links) is still online at http://georgebecali.ro/index_old.html.

Ovidiu Iane, the Ecologist Party candidate, won 22.515 votes. His blogul, http://www.ovidiuiane.ro/, was inactive when the research was conducted. Eduard Manole had a blog with the URL http://blog.eduardmanole.com/ and got 34.189 votes. Vadim Tudor, the candidate of the right wing radical party Great Romania, received 540.380 votes. http://vadimtudor.wordpress.com/ is a password protected blog, hence the archive could not be analyzed.

The Green Party candidate, Remus Cernea, received 60.539 votes. http://remuscernea.ro/ is a blogging platform containing elements that are specific for a presentation website. The independent candidate of Roma ethnicity, Constantin Ninel Potârcă, did not have a blog during the 2009 campaign and received 21.306 votes. Constantin Rotaru from the Socialist Alliance used the blog URL http://www.constantinrotaru.ro/ and won 43.684 votes.

The Content analysis on Antonescu's blog showed that of the 13 total posts (context units), 9 displayed positive attitudes and 4 negative attitudes. The most frequently used key-words (numbering units) in his blog posts were: 3 Traian Băsescu, 3 Govern, 2 PNL, 2 Johannis, 2 campaign, 2 referendum, 2 technocrats, 2 common-sense, 2 solutions, 2 vote, 2 polls, 1 PSD, 1 PD-L, 1 elections, 1 state reform, 1 communism, 1 IMF, 1 Crin Antonescu, 1 Parliament, 1 prime-minister, 1 unicameral, 1 message, 1 Gheorghe Dinică, 1 change, 1 trust. Therefore, the themes (recording units) could be identified as: 8 on the PNL Crin Antonescu campaign, 1 on Gheorghe Dinică, 1 on IMF, 3 on prime-minister, Parliament and Govern.

The key-words were used for interpreting data as image sub-markers, in order to establish the promoted image. Thus, the Image analysis of candidate Crin Antonescu showed that of the 13 total posts, 11 were focused on the political dimension, 1 professional, 1 personal.

Of the 29 total posts (context units), candidate Mircea Geoană had a General campaign attitude with 16 positive attitudes, 13 negative attitudes. The used key-words (numbering units) were 4 Boc, 3 "A single Romania", 3 farmers, 3 project, 2 Romanian village, 2 values, 2 despair, 2 Traian Basescu, 2 solutions. Thus, the following themes (recording units) prevailed: 3 on youth, 3 on economic stability recovery, 3 on criticizing Traian Bisescu, 3 on pensioner, 2 on cultural national values. The Image analysis of candidate Mircea Geoană showed that of the 29 total posts, 21 were focused on the political dimension, 5 professional, 3 personal.

Although he had daily updates on his website, Kelemen Hunor did not write more than 3 total posts (context units) on his blog. Regarding his general campaign attitude: 1 positive attitude, 2 negative attitudes. Key-words (numbering units): 1 half-way, 1 Govern, 1 crisis; Themes (recording units): 1 on visiting the counties, 1 on the vote of censure, 1 on the crisis. The image promoted through image makers is rather political: 2 political, 1 personal.

The Green Party candidate, Remus Cernea had a total of 78 posts: 25 in October and 53 in November. His campaign attitude was rather positive, with 60 positive posts and 18 negative. Key-words (numbering units): 11 debate, 11 dialogue, 6 guest, 6 candidacy, 5 European Greens, 5 Green Party, 5 signatures, 5 campaign, 4 vote, 4 supporters, 3 democracy, 2 press, 2 political rights, 2 undemocratic, 2 electoral law system, 2 change, 2 political class, 2 ecology, 2 environment. Themes (recording units): 25 on media coverage, 21 on electoral campaign, 8 on electoral system, 5 on Remus Cernea, 5 on debate, 5 on competitors, 2 on environment, 2 on Greens, 2 on vote, 1 on politics in Romania. Of the 78 total posts, the promoted image was in 56 political, 8 personal, 14 professional.

George Becali had a single blog post, having as theme his campaign motivation. Key-words: 1 religion, 1 tradition, 1 ethics. The promoted image is political. The socialist Rotaru had 16 blog posts, with 10 positive attitudes and 6 negative. Key words: 3 economic crisis, 2 Socialist Alliance Party, 2 capitalism, 2 socialist, 2 economy, 2 Marxism. Themes treated: 3 on visiting the country for electoral purposes, 2 on economic crisis, 2 on capitalist Romania.

Concerning the number of comments that the candidates made to their posts, as answers to the readers' comments: Cernea had 39 comments to his blog posts, of which 25 were political, 12 personal and only 2 professional. Geoană had 17 comments during the campaign, of which 11 were political and 6 professional. Antonescu had only 2 personal comments. Rotaru had 7 comments, of which 4 political and 3 personal. Hunor and Becali did not make any comment.

4. Conclusions

The research *The blog – political PR tool in the 2009 presidential electoral campaign* proves that the political candidates used the blog to transmit messages that were meant to consolidate their image as political figures capable to offer a strong message and solutions. The blog posts during the electoral campaign were focused on presenting the candidates' *political dimension,* on promoting the interests of the parties that the candidates belonged to, and, in a smaller degree than I anticipated, on attacking the political rivals.

The research denied the hypothesis that radical candidates showed a higher interest for the new communication technologies, as the blog was not attractive for the communication team of PRM or PNG. The populist candidates who used the internet

for viral marketing, mass-messages, campaign website, web 2.0 interactivity elements in 2004 campaign did not show any special interest for using the blog.

The campaign attitude displayed on the candidates' blogs in 2009 was rather positive than negative, as the politicians focused their posts on their own campaign activities. Even if all of them attacked Traian Băsescu, attacking the opponents constituted a smaller priority than transmitting the candidate's own themes and messages.

The image that the politicians intended to promote had a positive character: the blog was understood as a trophies exhibition, which helped the politicians' self-promotion process in a favorable manner.

As I have shown in the 2010 article *Online Negative Campaign in the 2004 Romanian Presidential Elections in Styles of Communication* (Momoc, pp. 89-99), the speech aggressiveness, mocking and attacking the counter-candidates represented visible rhetorical features in the 2004 presidential campaign. Surprisingly, the attack themes (online negative campaign) were used in a lower degree on the 2009 candidates' blogs.

As Sălcudeanu also noticed (2009:138), it is possible that the politicians were aware of the small influence that personal blogs had in attracting votes and perhaps they sensed that those who read their blogs belonged to the party's hard core – the captive electors that were loyal to the politician regardless of his communication errors.

Although the campaign attitude was a positive and self-centered one, the dimension of the promoted image was especially the political one, much more than the human or professional dimension. Even if in non-electoral periods the politicians promoted a more humanized image through their blog and offered information about their daily life, in the 2009 presidential campaign this approach was not noticed. The information about the candidate's family, personal issues, his dissatisfactions as person and citizen, hobbies and extraprofessional activities were missing from the blog.

The politicians did not offer consistent feedback to the comments they received. Overall, interactivity was missing, except for the case of Remus Cernea. The candidates' answers to the readers' comments were very few. The blogger politicians rarely used the opportunity to comment on their fans' comments. There were only a small number of reactions at what the blog's readers posted on it and in some candidates' cases there was no information about their professional life.

In the 2009 elections, the candidates missed their chance to promote a better shaped image of their human dimensions. The best rated candidates, such as Geoană or Antonescu, lost the opportunity to stand out among the bloggers and among the citizens who were internet users. There were smaller candidates who were more active online, like the Green Party candidate – he developed a community around his blog-site page. While they missed the opportunity to stand-out among the young electors by displaying a friendly or personal attitude, all the blogger candidates used the internet to promote their positive image of good politicians.

The next step of this research is to establish to which extent do presidential candidates' blogs contribute to building a space dedicated to the online political debate. If we take into consideration that bloggers create communities that isolate themselves from other online communities with different values, we cannot talk about the emergence of a civic online space. In this regard, the candidates' blogs will be thoroughly studied by identifying the direction to which the links in the politicians' blogs are leading. The degree of isolation or opening of the blogs can be established by analyzing the blogroll. Thus, we shall find out if the political candidates communicated with candidates from other parties, as well as if the links directed to the bloggers' own party or to political actors who share their ideology.

The blogs analysis will be continued by identifying the image and attitude that the 12 candidates promoted on video-sharing websites such as YouTube, on networks like Twitter, as well as by conducting semi-structured interviews with the candidates. The fundamental objective is to determine whether a direct relationship exists between the radical/populist politicians and their use of new-media in their political communication.

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