Chapter 64

Evolving In Step or Poles Apart?
Online Audiences and Networking during Poland and France 2011– 12 Election Campaign

Karolina Koc-Michalska
Audencia Group, France

Darren G. Lilleker
Bournemouth University, UK

ABSTRACT

Comparative studies are rare in the study of online communication campaigning. The authors chose two cases, Poland and France, to describe the two campaigns for the Parliamentary elections. Content analysis allowed the authors to detect online communication strategies and parties' attempt to reach different audiences. Web-cartography illustrates the parties' network connections. The authors find strong cross-country and resource-based differences for the more interactive and engaging features (Web 2.0), which are not that powerful for explaining audience-targeting strategies. Overall a sales strategy and a focus on marketing dominated over e-representation (exhibiting the parties' political record). In both countries social media platforms are well incorporated into online strategies. Facebook dominates in Poland, Twitter in France. Web cartography gives a counterintuitive picture of the Polish parties' network being much more personalized but also of more ghettoing within the supporting environment.

INTRODUCTION

The impact of new technologies on political communication, attracting different publics and building networks, in particular during election campaigns is a topic of interest enjoying extensive coverage over the last decade or so. Studies have evolved from asking whether websites or emails are utilized (Kluver et al., 2007; Ward et al., 2008) to exploring the extent of their embeddedness as they become standard tools for political communication (Foot & Schneider, 2006; Strandberg, 2008). In recent years focus has shifted towards social networking sites and the use of features which permit direct and public interaction between party operatives, candidates and the wider online

public (Vergeer et al., 2011). In particular, since the Obama presidential campaign in 2008, researchers have looked for evidence of 'Obamafication' in terms of building campaigning communities around a candidate or party (Lilleker & Jackson, 2011). Our research builds on these broad trends in research, focusing on adoption of online campaigning but developing the area conceptually by analyzing the utilization of features that potentiate specific experiences for visitors. Therefore, we assess the role online platforms play within the campaign as both persuasive communication and relational tools. Our study also adds a comparative dimension, we choose a small comparative sample but one that due to a small temporal differential, but meaningful systemic similarities and differences, permits insights into the trajectory of online political campaigning both between and within nations. Studying online campaigning in well-developed democracies however with different political systems (semi-presidential vs. parliamentarian) and different electoral systems (single seat-constituencies with two-round runoff elections vs. proportional list voting) allows us to understand the extent that systemic variables govern campaigning or whether there is a model of community creation that is becoming transnational across technologically advanced nations.

Comparative Political Communication

It is only through a comparativist lens that we can reach conclusions regarding the evolution of political communication that have any claim to validity (Pfetsch & Esser, 2004). Comparative research permits the understanding of similarities and differences that emerge across and within cultures (Aarebrot & Bakka, 1997) so enabling an understanding of the dynamics of cross-national and cross-cultural lesson learning as well as nationally-specific adaptations that occur within global trends. Comparativists must, therefore, develop frameworks that are universally applicable,

identify broad trends across nations, as well as being sensitive to identifying outliers and the potential reasons for dissimilarity (Pfetsch, 2004). Comparing election campaigning is fraught with challenges. Most nations have elections at different times and so capturing sufficient data across nations and cultures while isolating systemic variables is problematic. Where comparative research has been done it has largely drawn on multi-election, single nation studies (Schweitzer, 2011) comparative many-nations studies remain few (for exceptions see Gibson et al., 2003; Lilleker et al., 2011; Colombo et al., 2012; Vergeer et al., 2013a; Vaccari, 2013; Nixon et al., 2013). These studies have given much credence to the politics as usual thesis which hypothesizes that offline resources and traditions of communication are translated into online campaigning presence (Margolis & Resnick, 2000; Schweitzer, 2008).

Poland and France make for interesting comparative cases, offering insights from both a most similar and most different systemic perspective. They are both industrially and economically advanced nations within the European Union, though Poland is not in the Eurozone. Poland is also a reasonably new democracy which scholars argue to be fragile and dominated by charismatic individuals around which political parties are built (Millard, 2010); France's democracy is far more institutionalized although with a fragmented party system that can also lead to personalization (Samuels, 2002). In Poland elections are held every four years independently from Presidential elections while in France parliamentary elections usually take place every five years, a few weeks after the election of the President. This means that in France one could claim legislative elections to be strongly influenced by the campaign and outcomes of Presidential elections. In both nations there are bicameral legislatures, however in Poland both (Sejm and Senate) are chosen in universal ballot, in France it is only the lower chamber (National Assembly) that is chosen that way. In Poland 460 Members of Parliament (MP)

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