

Chapter 32

A Diachronic Analysis of Portuguese Digital Campaigning

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ABSTRACT

Bearing in mind the dearth of inquiry about new media and political campaigns in Portugal, this chapter proposes an unprecedented cross-cutting analysis of the nature of online communication during the period of explosion of the e-campaigns. Such a topography and cartography for Internet communications and political campaigning, comprising distinct elections over time, allows for assessing both the evolution of the campaign online and the most influential contributions of the Internet to those evolving trends. The multiple wave nature of the data involved in the chronological study of the 2000 campaigns in Portugal is further complemented with extensive in-depth interviews conducted with different actors from the limited universe of key respondents with direct involvement in the episodes under analysis. It concludes that the Internet went from a separate operation in previous campaigns to a more central role within all Portuguese campaign divisions. Despite being touted as a revolution and a great communication tool, the core features of the Internet have reinforced the continuity of previous tendencies rather than precipitating a radical break with the past. Moreover, although important interaction flows were created with the voters, those were discontinued once the campaign was over, thus making Websites, online platforms, social networks profiles, and video sharing channels used during campaign as obsolete as old leaflets left on the floor after the rally has ended.

INTRODUCTION

It is usually assumed that electoral campaigns constitute one of the pinnacles of the democratic system. To start with, they provide an invaluable opportunity to transmit a message which will be a vote motivator or will persuade electors to choose for a particular option, supported by a specific party or candidate. Unsurprisingly, they later become communication machines at election time, aiming at getting to the electorate and winning their consent (Mancini, 1999: p. 243).

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Indeed, candidates and political parties attempt to accomplish a number of objectives during the campaign, such as: to reinforce the trust of the loyal voters, to crystallize the latent support of those inclined to vote for the party, to capture the choices of the undecided and, if possible, to convert the hostile or opponent electorate (Beaudoux, 2007: p.29).

Campaigns also “provide us with the opportunity to determine how our own interests can be served” (Trent and Friedenberg 2008: p.3). After all, they constitute unique opportunities for voters get acquainted about the various political parties or candidates’ programmatic proposals, which allow them to make informed decisions about their voting choices (Beaudoux, 2007: p.31). Moreover, campaigns “communicate and influence, reinforce and develop, increase the enthusiasm and inform, motivate and educate” (Mancini, 1999: p. 243). Above all, it also allows voters to intervene, to discuss, to suggest and to interact with the candidates before granting them their votes (Beaudoux, 2007: p.30).

Last but not least, campaigns serve to legitimize both the political process and those involved in the election to the extent that the elected officials are considered to be the electorate’s free and legitimate choice.

Against this backdrop, and bearing in mind the existence of a society where communication channels multiply and play an increasingly important role in the public information process, it is pressing to study the means by which citizens can be informed about the political reality (Negrine, 2008). Although traditional and mainstream media are still the privileged vehicles of political information to the voters, the increasing role of the internet within election campaign should also be taken into account (Bimber and Davis, 2003; Rommele, 2003; and Norris, 2004). That is why a particular focus will be given in the present work to the nature of online communication during the period of explosion of the e-campaigns

As a matter of fact, it is nowadays indisputable that many changes occurred in electoral campaigning due to the use of new technologies by political parties. The advantages of using online tools in political campaigns are known and widely discussed by various authors (Gibson, Nixon and Ward, 2005, Chadwick, 2006; and Howard, 2006).

The internet, for instance, increases the competitiveness between the various political parties and several candidates. Its relatively low cost, easy accessibility or easy and widespread handling allows the newcomer parties to assert themselves as well as to circumvent the silence to which they are often devoted by traditional media, finding in the Internet a cheap and easy way to airing their messages (Chadwick, 2006: p.148).

Not being subject to the accuracy of news values and the selection made by the editors and journalists, the information available on the internet is also more diverse and accessible than the one provided by the conventional media coverage. Besides abundant content background (such as the biographies of the candidates or their programs), it offers plenty of in-depth opinion texts. The key structural information offered by the internet also serves as an antidote to the excess of professionalization of political communication that prevails in other traditional media (Gibson et al., 2005). Furthermore, it allows for the decentralization of the campaign to the extent that more citizens, candidates and local party organizations may start publishing political information and commentary through online devices.

Above all, the interactive campaign is, nevertheless, one of the Internet’s strengths, offering parties “a low-cost and very direct way to seek the immediate feedback from voters on their policy preferences that is crucial to the modern marketing of politics”(Ibid.: p.16). This particular feature allows the parties to engage in a *relational strategy* (Martin and Geiger quoted by Gibson, Nixon and Ward, 2005: p.17), that is, using the internet to maintain contact with a large number of individuals and react instantly to their comments.

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