Chapter 36

Israeli Representatives' Use of and Attitudes Toward Web Applications

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ABSTRACT

In the last decade, there has been a major increase in the technology that enables representatives and voters to connect with one another. Representatives can use email, their political party's website, personal websites, Facebook, e-newsletters, weblogs and Twitter simultaneously to bypass the traditional political media. The author asks, what are the usage patterns of these web applications? What are the characteristics of the representatives who use these technologies? What are their attitudes about their use? Most previous studies have concentrated on one perspective (representatives or voters) or used one research method (questionnaires, interviews, hard data). This article is unique in that it combines several research methods: interviews with representatives regarding their attitudes toward the new technology and hard data from the Israeli Knesset's website regarding the MKs' use of web applications. The findings demonstrate that the Israeli representatives are no different than their colleagues in other parliaments. Young MKs and junior MKs are more likely to use web applications than older MKs and those with more seniority. However, coalition MKs use web applications differently than opposition MKs. Furthermore, the representatives have positive attitudes toward the use of web applications and consider them useful for communicating with the voters.

INTRODUCTION

Political communication after World War II changed in three waves. First, for about two decades after World War II, political parties were the main vehicles of political communication with the voters (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999). Second, the emergence of TV during the sixties and the decline of the power of political parties enabled TV to become the main channel of political communication (Mayhew, 1997). The third wave involves multiple channels of communication such as TV, radio, and the Internet (Perry,

2004). This third wave enables representatives to connect directly to their voters, reinforcing the belief that democracy functions best when it is based on the bilateral and effective flow of information (Coleman et al., 1999). Nevertheless, representatives need to ask themselves, do they want to use the new digital media such as email, their political party's website, personal websites, Facebook, e-newsletters, weblogs and Twitter and to what extent? Coleman et al. (1999) suggested that representatives pass through four stages in their adjustment to the use of the Internet as a political tool: ignorance, exaggeration, ripening, and maturation and acceptance.

During the last two decades studies have shown that the third wave has become a tsunami (Schutz, 1995; Mughan, 2000; Campus, 2002; Corner & Pels, 2003; Gulati, 2004; Coleman, 2006; Jackson & Lilleker, 2011; Barnard & Kreiss, 2013; Baldwin-Philippi, 2015). Electronic communication technologies have transformed the visibility of representatives, making them visible to a mass audience of citizens who are not necessarily present at the same time in the same place (Gulati, 2004; Gibson, Lusoli & Ward, 2005; Coleman, 2006; Stanyer, 2008). Furthermore, Zittel (2003) emphasized that the Internet is putting pressure upon representative systems to become more decentralized and thus more accessible and responsive. The questions we need to ask are what the characteristics of this third wave of political communication? How do representatives use it? Do they follow the four adjustment stages suggested by Coleman et al. (1999)?

THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND WEB 2.0 IN POLITICS

The development of the World Wide Web in general, and the growth of social media and Web 2.0 in particular, created a new communications environment, which allows for direct, bilateral, updated and fast communication between representatives and their voters. It is important to note that the terms social media and Web 2.0 are often used interchangeable. However, scholars talk about Web 2.0 as referring mainly to online applications and use the term social media to describe the social aspects of Web 2.0 applications. Examples of these aspects include participation, openness, conversation, community and connectedness (e.g., Constantinides & Fountain, 2008; Zafarani et al., 2014).

The technological features and capabilities of social media and Web 2.0 have transformed the Internet from a space in which users passively consume information to an active medium where users can take a pro-active and interactive part in creating, exchanging and distributing information (e.g., Constantinides & Fountain, 2008; Jackson & Lilleker, 2011; Helms, 2012; Zittel, 2012; Klinger, 2013; Van Dijck, 2013; Kaigo & Okura, 2016; Valaei & Baroto, 2017). Scholars have identified five characteristics of social media that are used extensively by legislators - immediacy, openness, inclusiveness, the opportunity to debate issues of concern and sharing (Jackson, 2003; Zittel, 2003; Ward & Lusoli, 2005; Coleman, 2006; Norton, 2007; Leston-Banderia & Ward, 2008; Jackson & Lilleker, 2011; Helms, 2012; Hoffman, 2012; Jericho, 2013; Kaigo & Okura, 2016).

Today, more than two decades since its introduction, the role of social media in politics is a well-developed area that has been researched extensively (Wattal et al., 2010; Van Dijck, 2013; Ryan et al., 2014; Haro-de-Rosario et al., 2016; Hoffmann & Suphan, 2017). Representatives have discovered the great potential of social network sites and use them for their political campaigns (Kim, 2011; Williams & Gulati, 2013; Baek, 2015; Valaei & Baroto, 2017). Today, every political party and leader maintains an account on Facebook, Twitter and/or other social network sites where they publish their agenda. Recently, many representatives and their strategists have attempted to use social networks to communicate

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