

New Dimensions of Political Communication: Chances and Limits

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The media and communication are closely related subjects. For quite a time, in each public debate, references have been made to an increasing interdependence of the media and communication processes. Much attention is being paid to the changing context of the communication process, and especially the process of political communication. The role of the media in the process of public communication is, on the one hand, quite traditional: to inform the public, popularize information and mobilize citizens to action, all in the name of the public good. On the other hand, it is also noticeable that the modern media play new roles such as providers of entertainment, scandals, sensation, and enjoyment. All this brings a question: which of these functions tell us about the future of the media and, consequently, how do they change the process of political communication in the public sphere? And is this what we want?

The media – as we see more and more – play a role of open and hidden steersmen of social life. For quite a time we have been noticing a decreased frequency of di-

rect relations among people and social interactions among them, while indirect relations have been growing in importance. In everyday life, we are more and more surrounded by such mediated signs as sounds, radio, commercials, magazine covers, text messages, etc. More and more we have been communicating with other people by such communication means as telephone, Internet, fax or e-mail. These changes, of course, exert an influence on the forms of communication among citizens in the private and public spheres. For this reason, we are paying more attention to recognizing the power of the media, i.e. the process of media's influence on civic culture, awareness of citizens (Polish *świadomość obywateli*), people's behaviour, the decision-making process and its results.

We also notice a lack of the media's influence, i.e. their powerlessness. This is the case, for example, in the area of popularizing the legal culture among citizens. Out of all political campaigns that are organized, many have ended in a failure, and after this failure citizens have not been better informed or convinced and motivated

to undertake planned actions in a given area of social life. Many political leaders have been disappointed with the media and their credibility, especially in crisis situations when they were expecting the media to become the allies of the government. And nothing like this happened.

When we analyse the role of the media in the social protests directed against the government, which took place in countries of Northern Africa in the winter and spring of 2011, we notice that the political leaders in Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco, Libya and other countries of the region, who for many years had fully controlled the media, especially the electronic media (television and radio), have not been able to control the social revolts or are struggling to control the tumbling political system and its steersmen. However, it seems that the fall of dictatorships in this part of the world is only a matter of time. What failed here in the communication process between the government and the citizens?

It is impossible to show only one reason for this situation. As always, there are numerous explanations to these phenomena. It is important to point out that social ties, which to a greater degree are – in the modern world – generated by the media, are becoming more anonymous and one-way. These indirect relations, which are growing in importance, lie not in reality but in the virtual sphere. They have no such a forceful potential as direct ties, face-to-face contacts. The effectiveness of the media is determined first of all by direct relations and how favourable or unfavourable they are for indirect relations, i.e. those of the media.

Hence, there arises a question how today's governments should effectively com-

municate with citizens, what and whose interests are vested in the media, and in which directions should the changes go in political communication in the oncoming few years, especially when considering the new, emerging context.

In all political cultures, we observe the process of strengthening the political role of the media and the related increase in the importance of the process of political communication as generated by the mass media. What does this change mean and what does it translate into? In the last decades, the media, in the technological sense, have been changing very dynamically. This process is still in a growing phase. These changes relate to both media technologies (such as printing, television and radio) and the media institutions and their form of work in the public sphere (changes in the work of journalists in radio and TV stations, in the Internet editions of information providers who often use the slogan “Whole truth, 24 h/day”).

From the point of view of democracy, the ongoing changes in the media and the related process of public communication as the force favouring political emancipation, the more inclusive, participatory and democratic way of communication. This is a positive assessment of the results of technological changes in the media. In this case, the role of the so-called social media is particularly stressed as those contributing to the decentralization of power, which, further, contributes to an increased influence of the citizens in the area of exchanging information, opinion, ideas. Blogs, chat rooms, social networking services, discussion forums are of particular influence here.

A different perspective on the changes within the media and, as a consequence,

in the transformation of the political communication process, is the perception that the media are a tool of domination used for cementing the existing social order. New communication technologies enlarge this sphere of dominance as they create new possibilities to influence citizens. Media institutions are being developed, and their position in the public sphere is visibly increasing. It is being pointed out that more and more media are aspiring to the position of the “first” power, i.e. to govern, or at least have a significant influence on, public institutions and citizens. The process of political communication is directly related to this type of changes in the media and reveals one more type of dependence, namely the economic dependence of journalists as the steersmen of the media on the media owners and, indirectly, on the class that controls the capital. The assessment of this direction of changes and relations between the media and the communication process in the public sphere is a critical one.

Another perspective points to the neutrality of information technologies which, therefore, can serve both hegemonic and association communication. From this perspective, the media are assessed as politically neutral. Some indicate that they are apolitical. For this reason, the media can strengthen the position of the government, influence it, which means they can change the ways of its functioning.

The elitist approach, on the other hand, underlines the complexity of information technologies; as a result, access to technologies, as well as the possibility to use their potential are limited to a small group of people, usually those who are educated, work in public administration, are part of management teams or politicians. It allows

these groups to make many decisions important for wider society. At the same time, the remaining part of society – the mass – remains under the influence of decisions made by the selected minority and has an illusionary impression that they can influence real choices and decisions made in the public sphere. Here, the political role of the media, together with the process of political communication adjusted for this purpose, is assessed quite ambivalently.

Political communication, and especially the political role of the media, indicates the benefits and risks of the operation of such a mechanism and its powers. Hence, the political capabilities of media’s influence are becoming more and more multi-dimensional. Nonetheless, what is worth attention is the context within which the modern media function and which is undergoing a dynamic change. Analysts of the communication process, especially creators of the concept of *agenda-setting*, point out that the media (press, radio and television) are more effective in shaping the range and hierarchy of the issues that people discuss and think about than in influencing what people think about these issues.

Since the 1922 publication *Public Opinion* of Walter Lippmann it has been stressed that the role of the media in the process of shaping public opinion is increasingly growing. On the other hand, we can notice, in parallel, some actions undertaken by governments in order to control the media. The most prominent example is the *Patriot Act* passed by the US Congress in 2001 and aimed to protect citizens against terrorism but which, at the same time, was a document allowing government agencies to deeply enter the private

lives of citizens. Today, we notice a visible asymmetry between the range of the private sphere, which is shrinking, and the public sphere the range of which is expanding. This trend is being strengthened by the new media, such as the Internet, social networks, which very dynamically broaden the range of the public sphere, a debate within it, at the cost of the private sphere. A perfect example was the 2008 presidential campaign in the USA, which will be shown as an inauguration of the new forms of political communication with all effects it had on this process.

The meaning of the new media in the process of political communication

Recently we are more and more broadly using the term “new media”. But what does this term really mean? The new media is a term used to describe digital and computerized communication technologies developed in the late 1990s. Experiences of the last few years in the area of using the new media in the process of political communication show that they are becoming an integrated element of this process, and their usage in the oncoming years will only increase.

Observing the changes in the process of political communication, which are currently taking place and which result from the influence of the new media, we should refer to the roots of the concept of the *public sphere* as put forward in mid-1970s by the German philosopher Jurgen Habermas. Habermas (2004: 350–353) suggests that the public sphere should be regarded as a place where members of a community are able to collectively formulate opinions in an area which is free from the influence

of the government and economic entities. This concept stresses also the necessity for the citizens to actively participate in the process of communication and not to be only passive recipients of messages coming “from above”, from the government and the media. A regular contact between citizens and their political representatives in political institutions allows the realization of Abraham Lincoln’s ideal of democracy as the government of the people, by the people and for the people (Habermas, 2004: 350–353). According to Habermas, an interactive nature of the new media is the first chance for the realization of the modern public sphere.

One of the main strengths of the new media in the context of political communication is the possibility to receive “first-hand” information. What does it mean? This means the possibility to obtain the information about important events taking place at a given moment, as well information on the election program, the calendar of the work of a political party or any other public organization. An interested citizen can check the Internet page of a given institution and find what he/she is looking for.

A research by Paul Haridakis from the Kate State University on the sources of information about important facts and events show that average American citizens prefer to search information on important events in less official sources, i.e. from independent blogs or social networking sites, rather than to read about them on information sites prepared by the traditional media (Social..., 2008). Already in the 2004 presidential campaign in the USA, the Democratic candidate Howard Dean drew attention to the potential of the new

media in the process of building a social dialogue which before had been limited to public opinion polls.

By entering the market, the new media have significantly changed the course and meaning of the existing mechanisms. The new media offer in the public sphere an equal dialogue between political actors and citizens. This dialogue can be short-term, occasional, or long-term, more permanent. It allows the citizens, those who are “on the bottom”, to lead their own campaigns and all kinds of protest and contestation activities. Opinions of the users of the new media are just as important as the opinions of those who participate in the election meetings. Worth noting is the increasing number of online debates during which a confrontation between politicians and citizens takes place. In this way, a new quality of the public sphere is being shaped, in which the new media have an increasingly growing role.

Organization of political support by using the new media

Analysing the experience of the 2008 presidential campaign in the USA, one cannot but point to a significant application of the Internet as a means of communication with voters. This was due to the specificity of this medium, which allows a precise addressing of the message to a specific target group (Winnipeg et al., 2010). The mere presence of a candidate, a party or an institution in the net does not yet guarantee success. One needs to know in advance in which way voters can be drawn to a candidate and what to do to make this group support a particular candidate.

Campaign managers of the presidential campaign of Barack Obama presented its

messages not only through a traditionally organized campaign, but also in the net to precisely selected target groups. The method, which brought the planned results, was obtaining funds for the online campaign in the form of collecting, in a database, information about voters. This information allowed more precisely selecting and positioning messages for adequate groups of potential voters.

Data freely delivered by the Internet users to campaign managers allowed obtaining more detailed information about Barack Obama’s supporters. What can be established in such a situation? First, the place of living of a person as well as the form of property owned (house, apartment), religious background, size of family, credit obligations, sources of obtaining information (local television, radio, press or the Internet), at what time of the day the potential voter checks his/her e-mail account and answers messages.

The data that the users themselves had voluntarily passed to the General Staff allowed extracting more detailed information about those who supported Barack Obama (Madden, 2008). Using such well-developed database specialists in political communication working for Obama’s campaign could direct to the recipients of their messages the contents that were corresponding to the characteristics of the respondents themselves. In this way, a potential voter could hear and see what he/she was most interested in and what was closest to his/her interests and values. Such a mechanism allowed for a more precise targeting of potential voters. Analyzing the characteristics of the election campaign of Barack Obama from the perspective of the effectiveness of the process of politi-

cal communication, one notes that, apart from the Internet, it was focused on search marketing and contextual (?) commercials. The most often used search engines were Google and Yahoo. Contextual commercials and their usage in political campaigns mean that this is a commercial automatically adjustable to the content that is being emitted (Dwornik, 2008). It includes key words, and their application allows in any material to display, in parallel, promotional materials of similar nature, which builds a kind of “thematic family” and draws a potential voter to the topic covered during the campaign. A person who will pay attention to such a commercial is believed to react to it positively, especially when its content is related to the information sought after by this person. And this reaction is more positive than in situations when information is not of interest to a reader.

The shaping of the positive image of Barack Obama was greatly influenced by such a new element of communication as social networks. These networks actively joined the process of creating the image of the candidate. They included Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, Flickr, Digg, Twister, Eventful, LinkedIn, Black Planet, Faithbase, Eons, Glee, MiGente, MyBatanga, AsianAve, DNC Party Builder¹. Campaign managers planned to use these networks mainly to reach out to young people to whom they wanted to give an unlimited possibility to discuss and comment on the broadcast material. The purpose was to increase, by means of this medium, the interest to the oncoming elections and mobilize young people to action. The statistical data illustrating the number of registered

users and the number of visits on these sites show that Facebook was most effective in building the virtual community around Obama. We cannot go that far as to say that Obama won thanks to the new media, and especially social networks, but without any doubt these sites contributed to promoting such actions as *Fight the Smears*. On Facebook, Obama was supported by 2.5 million users, while the support of his opponent comprised only around 632 thousands of the Internet users². McCain’s campaign managers were building a virtual community around their candidate within a specially prepared portal called *McCain Space*.

The new media and Digital Democracy experts point out that what draws special attention in the process of political communication in the last presidential campaign in the USA is a change in the direction of the flow of information (Wykład..., 2009). In the traditional media and in campaigns organized with their application, the communication process follows the “top-down” approach. In the 2008 campaign, the “bottom-up” model was applied more often; it was created by citizens themselves. For example, YouTube was used not only by the presidential candidate and his campaign managers, but also by the media. This was most obvious during the presidential debate organized by the television network CNN which, through YouTube, mobilized over 2 thousand users to record and publish questions to the candidate.

In previous election campaigns, the sender (campaign managers) had been trying to control all messages directed to

¹ See Obama everywhere, www.barackobama.com

² Data taken from: http://techpresident.com/scrape_plot/facebook/2008

recipients. In 2008, this process changed. Specialists in political communication in Obama's campaign decided to take a different step: not to use only one message created for the campaign, but to multiply this message and involve potential voters into its creation. Campaigners were encouraging Obama's supporters to load their own clips to YouTube. One of the first materials broadcast on YouTube was a music clip "Yes We Can" prepared by musicians William from *Black Eyed Peas* and Jesse Dylan. This clip was very popular throughout the entire campaign and was viewed up to half a million times per day. In this clip, the artists performed a music version of a famous speech of B. Obama in which, in relation to overcoming the economic crisis, he used the phrase: "Yes, we can".

Another method to use new media in the election campaign was related to mobile phones and their communication potential, which is significantly different from that of fixed lines. Obama promoted himself as a fan of the new communication technologies, the proof of which was his constant use of the BlackBerry. The campaign managers decided to provide the Internet users with free applications and ringtones. Hence, actions were taken towards a constant flow of information to citizens about all events related to the campaign. Television broadcasts and internet sites included a short message "Text Hope.62262". It encouraged the users to send short messages to the Obama campaign (all information was registered to allow feedback).

One in six of Obama's voters actively supported him in the net³. On 4 Novem-

³ The data presented by the Director of the Obama campaign, d / s of new media – Joe Rospars at a meeting

ber 2008, 69 millions of American citizens voted for Barack Obama. Out of them, 11.5 million were Internet users who actively supported his candidacy during the campaign. These were not only young people, but also the elderly who, in many cases, set up the Internet to send a contribution to his campaign.

Also worth noting is the fact that during this campaign a great number of local networks of volunteers emerged and actively joined the campaign. The Internet served as a channel of communication and sending information among different groups which, in a short period of time, created a certain social movement. The campaign reached the grassroots level, that is the lowest level of inter-human communication, usually performed in an indirect form, by means of the Internet and short text messages.

The above data show that Obama's campaign on the Internet brought a change not only in the form of the candidate's election slogan *Change*, but also in the citizens' thinking about themselves and about the ways to communicate in the periods that are as important to the citizens as the president elections.

It was enough for one person (the so-called access point) connected to the Internet to become a link between the Obama campaign and the offline community. This allowed the grassroots activities to take off even among senior citizens and in areas where access to the Internet was still limited. This is a new dimension and a new quality in the process of political communication.

Additionally, on the Barack Obama's campaign website, an additional service, called My.BarackObama (slightly later the

in the U.S. Consulate in Krakow on 21.03.2009.

McCain campaign created a service called McCain Space), allowed the supporters of both candidates to maintain relations during the campaign. This allowed the supporters of both candidates to exchange ideas on the actions that could help their candidate. The same professional tools which until that time had only been used by members of a campaign for the organization of political events were now offered to volunteers who could, in their neighborhood, in their areas, in their states, organize an event promoting a candidate to increase his chance to win the election. Obama's supporters, who were very active on the Internet, organized over 200 thousand events offline⁴, which, without any doubt, contributed to the success of their candidate in the general election. Trust, which the campaign managers gave to the volunteers, caused them to feel like real participants in the election process, the authors and actors of the change.

The strategy to engage local communities in the election campaign by offering those tools and addressing them in the way *Go and vote. Tell your friends to vote* dramatically changed the way of communication among campaign managers, the candidate and the voters⁵ and by its personalization turned out to be particularly effective.

Final remarks

The 2008 election campaign in the USA was highly innovative in terms of using the Internet in the process of political commu-

nication. This fact should be positively assessed. One could assume that in future the political campaigns will be run with the help of a greater number of Internet tools depending on the further expansion of this medium and the education on using the new media in the process of political communication. This will undoubtedly lead to an increase in campaign budgets and draw more attention to selecting adequate tools for specific target groups among the Internet users.

One can also assume that the role of the television debates as used since the 1960s will decrease as an important element in influencing the citizens as regards their election choices. This, one can assume, will move the communication into social network sites. The experience of the 2008 campaign shows that the traditional media have decreased their usefulness in the campaigns and were put aside in favour of the increasing role of the Internet through which the campaign managers were able to shape their own messages.

The Internet has changed the model of communication during election campaigns. It has increased the importance of messages formulated from the bottom, which contributed to an increased civic activity. This fact leads to positive conclusions regarding the role of the new media in the process of political communication. Nonetheless, it does not imply that the new media have entirely pushed out the old media, and this probably will not happen in the future. The new media have overlapped the old media and caused the campaign online to proceed in parallel to the traditional campaign. And this is what constitutes a deep qualitative change in the process of political communication, in which the role of the new media is obviously increasing.

⁴ The data presented by the Director of the Obama campaign, d / s of new media – Joe Rospar at a meeting in the U.S. Consulate in Krakow on 21.03.2009.

⁵ Lecture given by Prof. David Silver, University of San Francisco, on Digital Democracy on 24.03.2009 at the Institute of Journalism and Social Communication, Jagiellonian University, Krakow, Poland.

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