
Politics 2.0: New Forms of Digital Political Marketing and Political Communication¹

Política 2.0: noves formes de màrqueting polític digital i comunicació política

Philippe J. Maarek

University Paris East - UPEC

From year to year, from country to country, political marketing seems to take a greater and greater part in political communication, implying a stronger and stronger professionalization of modern political communication which politicians need to master. But the surge of digital media, able to reach so many so quickly, and to allow down to top communication (the form), and increase the depoliticization and personalization of politics (the content) are working closely to change the political landscape which even questions the basis of the democratic process. Through digital media are quite helpful for political campaigns, politicians should also realize that they now constitute a permanent menace, through their capacity to become uncontrollable rumor mills.

Key words: *political marketing, political communication, François Hollande, Barack Obama, professionalization, depoliticization, democratic process, digital media.*

Any rere any, país a país, el màrqueting polític sembla abastar una part cada vegada més important de la comunicació política, de la qual cosa es deriva una creixent professionalització de la comunicació política moderna que els polítics estan obligats a dominar. La munió d'uns mitjans digitals capaços d'aconseguir tantes coses i de manera tan ràpida, al temps que aprofundeix en una millor comunicació (forma) i propicia la despolitització i la personalització de la pròpia política (contingut), suposa un terratrèmol capaç de canviar el paisatge de la política i, fins i tot, de qüestionar les bases del procés democràtic. Tot i que els mitjans digitals són realment útils per a les campanyes polítiques, ara els polítics han d'estar atents davant l'amenaça d'aquesta fàbrica de rumors sense control.

Paraules clau: *màrqueting polític, comunicació política, François Hollande, Barack Obama, professionalització, despolitització, procés democràtic, mitjans digitals.*

From year to year, from electoral campaign to electoral campaign, from country to country, political marketing seems to take a greater and greater part in political communication. Only a century ago, politicians communication tools were not so different than centuries before: speeches and meetings skills were still the main asset to win elections —the addition of printed press and posters aside—. Today, politicians still need to excel in these ‘traditional’ means of expression, while also being able to use several new kinds of media which seem to appear faster and faster. When media training for television appearances was enough to help John Kennedy win the 1960 American presidential run, today’s politicians must also tweet every ten minutes and use social media at whim whilst being able to play fools for TV talk-shows hosts who make a point in reminding their audiences that they are more witty or funny than their guests.

Failing to master these various communication crafts seems to be impossible, and politicians all around the world have now learned that this is part of the so-called ‘professionalization’ of political communication that they have to master in order to achieve their goals (Maarek, 2004, Holz-Bacha [et al.], 2007). Some scholars have even tried to elaborate standards of professionalization to evaluate the level of modernity, so to speak, of political communication in their country (Strömbäck, 2009).

We will here first assess how the two recent predominant evolutions of political communication, the surge of digital media (the form), and the depoliticization and personalization of politics (the content), are working closely to change the political landscape. We will then discuss some of the consequences of this introduction of digital media in politics.

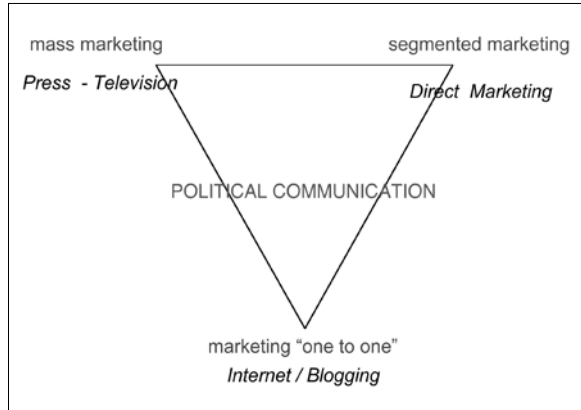
POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS TODAY: DIGITAL MEDIA AND DEPOLITICIZATION

THE DIGITAL MEDIA SURGE IN POLITICAL CAMPAIGNING

Taking on digital media, modern political marketing has quickly assessed that it could be one of the main tools of political communication.

In fact, this trend has followed the evolution of marketing itself. While ‘mass marketing’ was born and rose in the 1950s and 1960s, using mass media like the printed press and television, marketing techniques have gone through a first step towards the end of the past century by developing ‘direct marketing’: mass mailing, phoning, and the extensive use of surveys. Then, in the recent years, marketing has used more ‘intimate’ ways of relating to consumers by

bringing into play one-to-one procedures (Lendrevie & Levy, 2012). Altogether, exactly as for commercial marketing, Political Communication has followed the same evolution:



Moreover, digital media has helped political marketing specialists target the voters in ways which would make George Orwell, of 1984 fame, turn in his grave. Obviously, it is now possible to clearly survey consumers' personal habits thanks to the news tools born on the internet. Cookies and ISP memorization have indeed been used to develop a thorough knowledge of the web users' practices, most of the time, without even making him aware of the process. The philandering of any person connected on the Web may now be traced with the utmost precision thanks to minimalist pieces of software left on the computer or the tablet used on the pretense of improving navigation. Hence, there has been an enormous accumulation of knowledge about individual voters. This helps constitute so-called 'Big Data' on every one, or nearly so, which the main digital enterprises like Google have learned to master.

Barack Obama's 2012 reelection campaign was probably the first to use this kind of knowledge of the intimacy of the individual voters so precisely, using Big Data to that tell activists exactly which doors they were to knock on while canvassing and which kind of arguments to use. Here marketing one to one is perfected at the utmost level for the sake of political communication.

Altogether, one could say that digital media have been promptly taken on board and smoothly applied as a political communication tool for three main reasons: its *speed*, *versatility*, and *ease of use*.

Speed first, since any political message, independently of its kind, text, still or clip, may be uploaded from anywhere around the world and nearly instantly downloaded anywhere else without delay, thanks to the tremendous capacities of search engines, like Google, Bing or Yahoo.

Versatility, since digital media encompasses most of the forms of the previous communication means: text, as well posted on websites or blogs as in messages, private or public (thanks to social media like Twitter); still images, thanks to blogs or social media like *Instagram*; video clips thanks to social media like YouTube or Dailymotion.

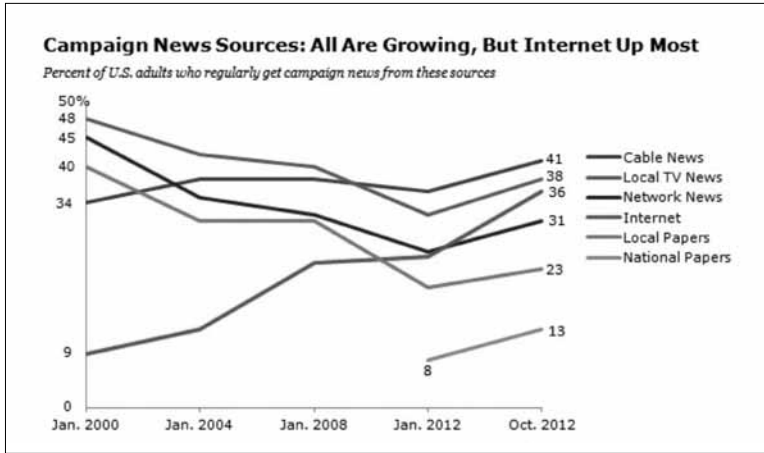
Ease of use, finally, has drastically changed the pattern of political communication. When only politicians and political parties were able to have a voice in the public sphere, through traditional media (meetings...) or mass media (newspapers, radio and television...), digital media replaced this kind of top-down communication by bottom-up and horizontal communication open to any person digitally connected with the cheapest smartphone, thus becoming an instant source of communication.

It is not surprising to see how digital media's role in political marketing has so quickly grown during the first decade of the 21st Century. Its first actual input in politics clearly happened during the 2004 American presidential election. In order to achieve national recognition, during the fall of 2003, some months before the first primaries, Howard Dean, the little known outgoing governor of the small state of Vermont, devised a clever internet petitioning campaign, through the combined use of a website, *DeanforAmerica.com* and a blog *BlogforAmerica.com*, and a bold use of the first social networks, such as *Meetup.com*, thus using internet interactivity at its best. This allowed him to raise a considerable amount of funds for his campaign, and also to promote his candidacy efficiently in the first primary races of the following year with some interesting results. He failed afterwards, but this newly gained notoriety did propel him to the helm of the Democratic Party as Chair of the Democratic National Committee —he was only replaced when Obama came to power (Maarek, 2011)—.

In many countries, internet use for political communication expanded quickly in the following years. In France, for instance, the negative result of the 2005 referendum for the European Constitution was partly attributed to the Web, which saw many more attacks than positive views; attacks were led by blogs animated by some anonymous citizen, while most of the traditional media and politicians were campaigning for a positive vote (Maarek, 2007). In the same country, two years later, Ségolène Royal's victory in the Socialist's primaries was a further consequence of internet penetration in politics: she had worked out an elaborate system of 'friendly' blogs aggregated around her main website, *Désir d'avenir*. On Nicolas Sarkozy's side, her main opponent, a Web-TV, *NSTV.com* (which stands for Nicolas Sarkozy Télévision) obtained a strong audience during the campaign and became a well-known model of internet political TV.

Helped by the leeway given by a 2006 ruling of the Federal Elections Commission, Barack Obama's 2008 campaign went one step further in internet use, hiring no less than Chris Hugues, the co-founder of Facebook and Joe Rospars, a member of Howard Dean's 2003/2004 campaign staff, the latter acting as 'New Media Director'. Around 1.5 million accounts were opened on his campaign website, and he amassed nearly 3.2 million 'supporters' on Facebook, and nearly one million 'friends' on MySpace. Further on, in 2012, we already mentioned that his team was the first to compute extensively the internet trends and habits of every person who consulted one of his campaign websites or blogs, through an elaborate system of tracking cookies, hence accumulating a mass of precise information on millions of citizens —'Big Data'—.

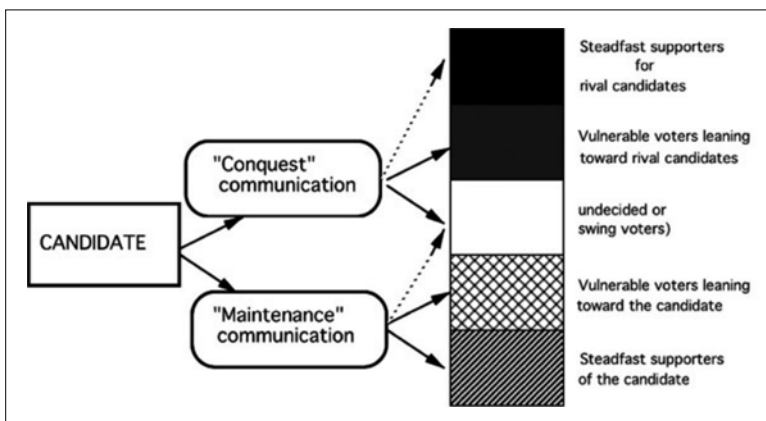
The internet has become an unavoidable tool of political communication in most countries holding democratic elections, even if television still remains the main way for citizens to get their political information:²



Clearly, if the internet has not (yet?) become the main media used for political information, ‘professional’ politicians can no longer ignore it.

PERSONALIZATION AND DEPOLITICIZATION OF POLITICS

Modern political communication has followed a very specific trend for some years. Whether deciding to win new voters (‘conquest’ communication) or to maintain the fidelity of their followers (‘maintenance’ communication), political marketing specialists nearly always advise politicians to target undecided voters and the abstentionists. These categories of apolitically minded potential voters, who have so little interest towards politics, are deemed to be easier to attract than other parts of the electorate less inclined to completely switch their vote from one side of the political spectrum to the other (Maarek, 2014).



One of the most notable consequences of the increased professionalization of political communication has therefore led to its ‘depoliticization’: in order to reach these swing voters, politicians tend to focus more on personal issues and image building rather than on core political issues.

This explains the recent move towards personalization of political communication in so many campaigns. The personal values of a politician are much easier to convey than political content and programs to this kind of audience less motivated by politics. The evolution of the exposure of the private life of politicians towards an uncontrolled tabloidization³ has been generally analyzed as a consequence of the personalization of politicians' communication paradoxically required by this professionalization process. More and more frequently, politicians are advised to 'fictionalize' their life, so to speak, in order to raise sympathy from the voters on account of their personal values and trajectories rather than on account of their political beliefs. One of the best examples of this so-called storytelling (Salmon, 2007) was the 2008 presidential campaign of Barack Obama, notably in his book, *The Audacity of Hope*, where he was comparing his personal life itinerary to the history of the United States, as a melting-pot of capacities drawn from all around the world (Obama, 2006).

Following that line further on, many politicians are now publicly exposing their private lives and their families in order to reach undecided voters by showing them that they could be trusted as their mirror images, rather than being distant elite figures. The better recent example of that kind has been the 2012 wining presidential campaign of François Hollande in France, whose main slogan was '*a normal President*'—posing as a normal French citizen (Maarek, 2013a, b)—. He was thus clearly building his image in the opposite direction of the image of his main opponent, the outgoing President Nicolas Sarkozy and his vibrionic way of operating.

This marketing ploy has clearly been at the source of some of the direct campaigns. The personalization of campaigns has led the way for negative television ads attacking politicians about their persons rather than with arguments on issues and programs. Some scholars have even advanced with strong opinions that negative campaigns have contributed to increasing abstention and lassitude about politicians in the long run and to mislead the democratic process (for instance Ansolabehere *et al.*, 1995), while a few still advocate the ability of this kind of marketing strategy to reach voters previously abstaining (see Geer, 2006).

SOME CONSEQUENCES FOR POLITICS OF DIGITAL MEDIA USE

DIGITAL MEDIA BENEFITS FOR POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

The versatility of digital media has made it instantly useful for most aspects of modern political communication and campaigning.

The first step in its use remains the politician's website. While websites already seem somehow outdated, since they allow theoretically only to connect to pages of information unilaterally uploaded by the politician, they remain excellent crossroads in digital media possibilities. They are positioned as essential routers of the campaign on digital media by political marketing special-

ists. With its three dedicated audiences, general public, activists and press, a website can point directly to the various possible categories of users of digital media. Passers-by might surf from there to a dedicated net TV or to friendly clips and blogs, partisans may be convinced to linger and to make donations, activists may download models of posters and other tools for their own local communications, and journalists may find an agenda for a politician's meetings around the constituency and a written or visual summary of the recent highlights of his campaign they might have missed.

Digital media go further by reaching potential voters who have no interest in politics and do not visit political blogs or websites—at least willingly—. The use of social media, for instance, directs them easily to a politician or a party clip or other kind of propaganda, if the necessary technical tricks are put to use. An individual who connects for leisure to a video sharing platform like YouTube or Dailymotion will for instance be keen to watch the most popular clips, which may be political clips if they are well devised and properly tagged to score highly in the social media ranking system.

This way of reaching voters was a strength of Barack Obama's 2008 campaign, when "friends" uploaded on YouTube funny clips to help his campaign, like *Obama Girl, I have a crush on Obama*⁴ or *I am an Obama Baby*,⁵ which so many politically uncommitted Americans watched to share a laugh. At the same time, sentimental and more directly propagandist musical clips, like *Yes we can!* arranged by Will.i.am (from the *Black Eyed Peas*), went online to gratify Obama supporters in the same way *NSTV* had worked to please Nicolas Sarkozy followers a year previously in France. Today, more and more elaborate political webseries now catch the eyes of the politically committed and curious people alike to the same effect.

DANGERS OF DIGITAL MEDIA FOR POLITICS AND POLITICIANS

While digital media have noticeably enhanced the possibilities of political communication, it has also very rapidly endangered unexpectedly politicians themselves and even the political process.

Politicians first, have been quickly enduring the immediacy of the internet, which now relays their most minute weaknesses or mistakes to vast audiences. During the 2012 American campaign, for instance, a stupid tiny loss of memory by Texas Governor Rick Perry, then candidate to the Republican primaries, was instantly taped and put online on YouTube and the like and viewed by several millions of citizen, thus leading to a pitiful withdrawal of his candidacy within a few days.

Similar mishaps happen all around, and their visibility is tremendously increased by their replication on social media, whether some individuals find it funny to upload them on YouTube or Dailymotion or whether politicians do the same to hinder their opponents. From Ségolène Royal's tongue slips during the 2007 French Presidential campaign to Barack Obama being laughed at when he appeared on John Stewart's *Comedy Central* televised talk-show, the list of politicians having to endure their smallest mistakes watched over and

over again by hundreds of thousands of people on the internet afterwards is growing from day to day.

But the internet is not only presenting a danger for politicians running for election, or for their personal image, it does also raise a new set of difficulties for government actions and communication. In the past, when a government was trying to enforce an unpopular decision, only a very high level of discontentment leading to street demonstrations and the like would have an impact on its implementation—independently of its virtues—. Today, internet petitions, blogs and tweets emanating from everyone's smartphone instantly convey the tiniest discontent about a political measure to huge crowds and may lead a government to its withdrawal.

Of course, the internet has also become a convenient way to gather crowds against authoritarian governments, as blatantly proven by the surge of Tunisia, Egypt and Libya crowds during the Arab Spring. Digital media do then constitute a loud-speaker for citizen voices, thanks to the bottom-up and horizontal communication abilities it lays at the hands of any individual holding a (now) cheap smartphone. Here, of course, one could say that digital media dangers for governing politicians is helping the democratization process of some countries, a problem for some becomes an element driving to a solution for others...

CONCLUSION

The professionalization of modern political communication has without any doubt rendered digital media a tool which politicians cannot avoid and which they need to master. Through elaborate techniques of mapping individuals tastes and distastes, digital media are particularly helpful for reaching swing voters which may change the outcome of an election or help carrying an unpopular but necessary political decision.

Nevertheless, politicians should also realize that digital media now constitute a permanent menace, through the capacity to become uncontrollable rumor mills, rumor here strengthened by sounds and clips uploaded in a few seconds by any passer-by catching by chance a politician's mishap. It may even become more difficult to counteract when any politically minded citizen or group of citizens can use digital media to deny a policy decision they deem unfair or wrong.

Somehow, digital media use must be carefully balanced in regards to the democratic process. When digital media noise forces a politician to withdraw because of personal attacks based on tiny mishaps or false rumors, when it impedes a government trying to enforce its actions, the democratic process may be endangered. Of course, this may happen with excessive or ill-intended use of any political marketing tool, but here the new risks are provoked by digital media's ability to reach so many, so quickly.

Philippe J. Maarek is Professor of Information and Communication Sciences, PhD in Political Science and Director of the Center for Comparative Studies in Political and Public Communication. He has chaired the Research Committees of the International Political Science Association (IPSA), and the similar Section of the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAM-

CR). His books include *Campaign Communication and Political Marketing* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), with other versions published 4 times in French, and 2 in Spanish as *Marketing político y comunicación* (Paidós Ibérica / Planeta, 2009, reprinted 2012). He serves on the editorial board of several International Journals and has been awarded the prestigious French 'Legion d'Honneur'.

Notes

¹ This paper is based on the speech delivered in the I Conference on Political and Social Communication organized by the Master's degree in Political and Social Communication of the Blanquerna School of Communication on the 29th of April 2013.

² Source of the table: PEW Research Center, at <<http://www.journalism.org/2012/10/25/social-media-doubles-remains-limited/>>.

³ French scholars and journalists strange-

ly use the (wrong) anglicism 'peopolisation', while English speaking scholars prefer 'tabloidization'.

⁴ A young latino woman claiming her love for Obama in a diverting show where she appears next to huge photos of the candidate in various attires.

⁵ A demoniac baby shouting and crying loudly who is only appeased by Barack Obama's name.

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