

Chapter 54

Political Communication and Twitter in Greece: Jumps on the Bandwagon or an Enhancement of the Political Dialogue?

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ABSTRACT

Social media already serve as a new place for the development of a “public sphere”, hence the exchange of argumentation on issues of public interest. More specifically, Twitter has been rather frequently used by politicians and parties in their attempt to establish a new way of communicating with the electorate. Drawing on the concepts of public sphere and propaganda and by conducting content and thematic analysis on the tweets of the two biggest Greek political parties, New Democracy (ND) and the Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA), this chapter examines Twitter as a platform of information dissemination and dialogue. The aspiration of this study is to contribute to a growing volume of research that seeks to examine the potential of microblogging to animate political communication and to increase political participation.

INTRODUCTION

Internet has transformed the way political communication has been conducted in most parts of the world. Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) have provided politicians with a wealth of opportunities to campaign and communicate with their electorate in novel and creative ways. The use of internet for political communication purposes has been studied by many scholars including Hill & Hughes, 1998; Jones, 1998; Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999; Livingstone, 1999; McChesney, 2000; Norris, 2001; Mcnamara, 2008; Vaccari, 2008; Schweitzer, 2008; Lev-On, 2011; Lilleker & Jackson 2010, 2011;

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Towner & Dulio, 2012). As any new communication practice, the use of ICTs in political communication has both triggered hopes of its potential democratic impact, as well as raised concerns for impending adversities. In particular, the studies dated prior to 2004 have designated the risks of such a development, pointing out the threats in social consistency and the debate over the digital divide (Hoffman & Novak, 1998; Wellman, 2000). Nonetheless, many of these studies were prior to the communication applications offered by Web 2.0. The advent of social media such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter led to a modernisation of political communication (Bimber & Davis, 2003; Carpenter, 2010). Politicians around the world have increasingly sought to capitalize on the new opportunities offered by the Web 2.0 applications and they embarked on new campaigning strategies, new modes of fundraising, mobilization and information gathering.

Studies that supervened the 2004 US presidential election (Macnamara, 2008; Smith & Rainie, 2008; Chen & Walsh, 2009; Dahlgren, 2009), which according to Xenos & Moy (2007, p. 704) was “a critical turning point” in the use of social media, have been more optimistic. The innovative and extensive use of social media such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and MySpace in the 2008 and 2012 U.S. presidential campaigns has been the watershed event for modern political communication. In the 2004 U.S. presidential campaigns, Vermont Governor Howard Dean successfully used the new applications for fundraising and mobilization (Trippi, 2004; Carpenter, 2010; Veneti, 2014). The Obama campaign in 2008 U.S. presidential elections created its own social networking site, My.BarackObama.com (MyBO) and the McCain campaign followed some time later with McCainSpace. Both MyBO and McCainSpace allowed individuals to create their own profiles, interact with others, donate funds, join groups and arrange events (Towner, 2012; Chadwick, 2008; Carpenter, 2010). Several studies on the use of social media in politics suggest that the new technologies provide a fertile new ground for new forms of public participation, political mobilization and information diffusion (Graham, Broersma & Hazelhoff, 2013; Smith, 2009; Lilleker & Jackson, 2010, 2011). Despite the flourishing use of ICTs in political campaigning, there are still questions over their substantial capabilities to empower democracy by fostering greater participation, encouraging political conversation and improving interactive information-sharing (Coleman, 2001; Jackson, 2007). As such, there is a pertinent need for more studies to examine if and how the new media have a democratic impact.

This chapter contributes to a growing volume of research that seeks to examine the potential of microblogging to animate political communication, increase political participation and provide a new repertoire of collective action (Castells, 2007, p. 255; Chadwick, 2008; Larsson & Moe, 2011; Jackson & Lilleker, 2011; Adi, Erickson & Lilleker, 2014). Twitter has been heralded as a new tool of online campaigning and electorate engagement. In Greece, during the last two years, Twitter has been rather frequently used by party members and press offices of the most significant political parties, in order to establish a new way of communicating with the electorate (Burgess & Bruns, 2012; Hutchins, 2011; Neuhaus & Webmoor, 2012; Ovadia, 2009; Heinrich, 2012; Hermida, Fletcher, Korell, & Logan, 2012; Small, 2011). In Greece, mainstream media are considered unreliable due to vested interests between the media moguls and politicians (Veneti & Karadimitriou, 2013), whilst at the same time there is a growing number of internet users which increases exponentially (OECD, 2015; “Greece”, 2015). Throughout 2014, there were 418.700 active Twitter users in Greece – 257.700 more than 2012- with 6 tweets per second (Trending.gr, 2015). Moreover, similar statistics showed that Greek Twitter users’ attention was primarily on socio-political issues such as #skouries, #occupyert, #ertopen, #killahp etc. Therefore, it

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