Chapter 54

Social Media in Political Public Relations:
The Cases of the Portuguese Social Democratic Party (PSD) and the Socialist Party (PS) in the 2009 Parliamentary Campaign

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ABSTRACT

This chapter demonstrates how Web social media can be used in different ways to create more personalized or more impersonal messages in political public relations campaigns. When everyone is awakening to the potential of these social media for political communication campaigns, it is necessary to find alternative strategies to spread our word and distinguish ourselves from our competition. At this point, it is important to define the targets of persuasion and public relations; in addition, the manner in which a public relations campaign can be helpful is yet to be established, as well as the most adequate social media to be used.

INTRODUCTION

A revolution does not happen when a society adopts new tools. It happens when society adopts new behaviors (Clay Shirky, 2008).

The Internet has evolved from a late 20th century information platform, to a 21st century manifold platform that leaves behind models devised at the time of broadcast to enter a time of a two way system of communication.

Besides this relevant change, the Internet not only allows ample exchange of thought, but also trade, as an e-commerce tool that provides a new virtual marketplace where users meet online. This means that, additionally, it has turned into a source of easy access to information about products, organizations, public and political issues. Nowadays, web social media have the potential to provide platforms where organizations and individuals can dialogue directly with stakeholders and segmented publics without the traditional mediation of gatekeepers (Phillips & Young, 2009, p. 7). Thus communication became porous and (sometimes) more transparent, reducing inefficiencies and price disparities (Bornheim, 2001, p. 21).

While being recognized as bringing forth the need to inform about everything with transparency and in the right time, the Internet primarily contributes to the availability of an immense volume of information, which can be turned into knowledge, and lead to enhanced freedom of choice, consequently transforming informed consumers into more demanding patrons. This way, and thanks to this platform, it is possible to search for all kinds of information in a quick, constant and selective form. Thus, competition between social actors is getting stronger every day and they are obliged to establish innovative strategies that present fewer costs, high quality, engaging ideas and arguments, and to develop a relation of bigger proximity with each other.

However, the entire world is not online, i.e., web consumption by different generations is not similar (PEW, 2009). On the one hand, prevailing identitarian models of Internet users were early on found to be mainly male white, affluent (Loader, 2011, p. 758). Besides, and thanks to the digital divide, not everyone has access to Internet (income, accessibility, literacy constraints) (Norris, 2001). So we need to know who our publics are, how long they are spending online, what they are doing, and how they interact with web social media, before we define our online communication strategy.

According to Matt Haig, the Internet has changed the activity of the Public Relations practitioner and we are facing a new scenario of e-PR: everything that is communicated online is Public Relations activity and the success of online communication depends on the kind of relations that the organization is able to build with its online audience (2000, p. 1). So the fulfillment of e-PR is largely chance-related and bets on maintaining close and continuous relations that have been started, managed and kept online, but that can, at any moment, be transferred to a presential situation, for example, to a special event promoted by the organization or brand.

A different opinion has Deidre Breakenridge. Though she agrees that web 2.0 is "putting the public back in Public Relations" (with Brian Solis, 2009), Breakenridge states that the web is only a technological platform, that puts communication together but it will always be the Public Relations' professional job to create messages and interaction with different publics, suiting the former to whatever it takes to get the latter's attention (2008, p. 261). Nevertheless, web social media are amplifying the value and effectiveness of Public Relations as a profession. This opinion is shared by Phillips and Young when they recognize the need for the Public Relations practitioner to define the organization's Internet strategy as more than a presence/absence on a new platform, and more as a discipline in its own right with the benefits of low costing storage, maintenance and distribution of information (2009, pp. 70-71).

In the political area, Public Relations have found a home in the field of political communication (Newman & Vercic, 2002). Public relations have a twofold role in this area; they deal with the communicative needs of political campaigns, candidates' image and reputation management, while simultaneously choosing the adequate tools to transmit those messages to different publics. So Public Relations can be seen as "lubricants that enable political machinery to run smoothly" (Newman & Vercic, 2002, p. 3). As a communication

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