International Journal of E-Politics
Volume 10 • Issue 2 • July-December 2019

A Possible Framework for Attention-Based Politics:
A Field for Research

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ABSTRACT

According to scholars, the use of mediatization could be understood as a communicative representation of politicians or spin doctoring, but either way, it ends in self-representation and in "self-initiated stage-management." However, the social media environment could give a new perspective on the communication of the political actors in political communication. This communication could be seen as self-broadcasting that could be conceptualized as attention-based politics. This article aims to give a brief introduction to a theoretical framework of the phenomenon and to provide research directions in order to understand politician's strategies in attraction, maximization, and the direction the attention of followers and journalists.

KEYWORDS

Attention-Based Politics, Mediatization, Political Communication, Social Media, Strategic Communications, Traditional Media

INTRODUCTION

The online environment of the political landscape is rapidly changing. The change is not merely the question of the technology, but the behaviors of its users, as well. Such trends can be observed in the nature of campaigning or the relationship between citizens and politicians. The result of this connection ends in different relations. For instance, in Central and Eastern Europe, politicians will do a lot in order to reach their electorate through the media. This attitude will end in media – politics relationship that emphasizes the 'logic of politics over media' and keeps the 'logic of media over politics' in the background (Surowiec & Štětka, 2019). In other countries, one can witness the increased activity of politicians on online social networks, especially on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, with the rapid growth of TikTok in behind. These channels demand different communication techniques as opposed to the previous media (e.g., websites, TV and radio channels, newspapers), that have been successfully adopted by the politicians. In this environment, it is not enough to communicate and wait for the editors to put the main point of a politicians' message into a usable form.

Similarly, to the celebrities, politicians have to operate a 'customer service' (Kwak et al., 2010, p. 593). Politicians' communication warn that the significance of personalized politics has increased (Bennett, 2012). Still, there is nothing new under the sun, the politicians want to communicate with the citizens, just the use of the communication channels and their behavior behind this usage has changed. A common characteristic of the behavior is that politicians' communication typically leave a small space for interaction. At the same time, politicians are having more followers on average and they

DOI: 10.4018/IJEP.2019070102

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should be actively involved in more conversations (Crawford, 2009, p. 530). However, involvement is not enough. To reach new followers or voters politicians should be more visible. For this reason, keeping of attention gets a greater role because politicians should fight for the followers with other content providers, as well. It is no longer the exclusive responsibility of media companies to get and keep audience and increase their number for the politicians.

Research of political attention (e.g., agenda-setting) is a popular topic in social sciences. However, the research on politicians' ability to reach, keep, and maximize the attention of their followers is not analyzed thoroughly in the literature. This study aims to propose an underdeveloped research field. The starting point is that the parties and politicians have been able to adapt exceptionally well to the different media and technological-technical revolutions from the telegraph to the internet. The communication of the political actors has been evolving together with the media and the actual trends of social communication. The end of this process is that politician do not only fight with other politicians for the opinion leader position but often with non-political actors as well. An example will give a short look at how this work today. Sure, politicians deny this kind of fight for attention, saying, that their social role rents politics a place in publicity. However, practice shows that the attention paid to them is decreasing with the increase in the number of people who are apolitical, disillusioned, disappointed and people with other negative attitudes.

Meanwhile, there are public actors who became celebrities-influencers from everyday people appearing in the stage of publicity. Traditional opinion-forming media channels are losing their significance, while with the spreading of smart devices people communicate in dense networks of inter- and multi-personal relations. To fill the gap in the literature, attention-based politics will be introduced. Through this concept the development of common patterns in political actors' communication on social media can be demonstrated.

THE ONLINE ENVIRONMENT AND POLITICS

The works on the ecosystem of online campaigns, internet tools, and social networking sites often include studies on shares, likes, contacts, information exchanges, online activism, etc., and naturally on the effects of communication. Early developments of this were written in a positivist attitude because the first 'communities' worked based on direct electronic democracy.[1] The Millennium years changed this attitude towards the internet and online communities. Also, the aspect had changed how people use online communities. The so-called dark side of the internet emerged too and became visible in research, for instance, the terrorists' networks (Maréchal, 2017; Orenstein & Kelemen, 2017), the supposed intervention attempts of Russian crackers in the American presidential elections and the Brexit referendum in 2016 (Bessi & Ferrara, 2016; Narayanan et al., 2017), hate speech (Ross et al., 2016), and the spreading of fake news (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Berkowitz & Schwartz, 2016) could be mentioned here. The list can be well expanded until it gets to the users who, for example, are also able to challenge the positivist perception by deliberately insulting other users (Cheng et al., 2017; Pongó, 2016). The fair warning of these studies is that the communication environment has changed in the past decades, and this kind of situation influences the everyday life of people (Dimitrova & Matthes, 2018). The real question is whether there is a noticeable effect in their behavior, could it still describe by the impact of the earlier mediums?

Scholars studying the behavior of users or effects of social media are often referring to The War of the Worlds the famous radio play of Orson Welles's The Mercury Theatre on the Air company from 1938. This lesson tends to show how the media works and what effects it can have. However, since then it is known that media, as well as social media, works a bit differently. Still, the results are similar. A possible example of this is the case that happened after the American presidential elections in 2016 (Maheshwari, 2016). After the election of Donald Trump on 8th November, there were spontaneous demonstrations against the president-elect. These demonstrations were mostly organized and attended by the voters of the Democratic candidate. The American right-wing media doubted the grass-root

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