

The Effects of Viral Marketing, Including Fake News, in Elections Campaigns

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to present how viral marketing works in politics, especially in election campaigns. At present, viral techniques are intensively used to promote candidates in elections, through new methods and new channels of communication. Although the phenomenon of viral marketing is intensively used in the electoral communication strategy, there are no concrete techniques specifically dedicated to this type of marketing. From the beginning this type of the concept, has been intensively used and applied in the communication strategy especially for the business sector, therefore concrete application techniques exist for other types of levels individually. The campaigns of the last decade in Romania and in the world, in general, through the presence of the new social networks, demonstrated the importance of this type of communication in promoting the brand image of a candidate. The presence of viral information and news, whether true or false, demonstrates how voters are extremely sensitive to this type of information. Therefore, our article tries to emphasize that in modern politics, viral marketing creates the image of the political leader, an aspect that becomes decisive for voters, although it is not yet a regulated field and there are various problems, including the most serious one being that of fake news, which directly affects society and democracy.

Keywords: viral marketing, elections, candidate, fake news.

JEL classification: M31.

1. Introduction

Freedom of expression is fundamental, and political discourse is the most protected form of speech when we refer to human rights and constitutional law. However, political communication, especially during election periods, is constantly subjected to various forms of regulation. If we refer to the states of the European Union, we can observe various measures applied, regarding the forms of political communication and the PR of the candidates, varying from one state to another. Examples of measures would be transparency and limitation of

expenses for election campaigns and, the measure recently adopted in Romania, the limitation of the time that can be purchased for broadcasting of campaign adds, the limitation of sponsorships by individuals, corporations or foreign entities, etc. In the same direction, there are states that during the election campaign imposed very clear rules regarding the presence of candidates on TV / Radio, by adopting laws that allow the equal and balanced presence of all candidates in the media. The purpose of these rules is to maintain the integrity, fairness and legitimacy of the election process and its outcome and through it, to avoid as much as possible the private interests of political parties, avoidance of buying public opinion through the media which can largely control the election results.

These rules are enshrined in electoral law, audiovisual law and self-regulatory codes and are also reflected in international human rights standards which impose these rules as necessary and proportionate. The expansion of internet access and the invention of social networks, offered people the opportunity to take an active part in the election process and to freely express their opinions and interact with candidates. With the emergence of these new types of media, political parties have taken full advantage of the opportunity to promote their interests, given the fact that it can be considered a new, unregulated sector, unlike the aforementioned promotion of campaigns through traditional media methods. According to the 2015 Ipsos Mori and King's College London election report, 71% of British citizens (88% aged 18-34) felt that the presence and use of social media provided a voice for people who wouldn't normally participate in debates. and the electoral process all together. This feeling is applicable and generally valid globally. Social platforms have proven to be the most handy communication channels for candidates to present their governance program / agenda. However, changes and the accelerated growth of election-related content consumption in recent years, as well as growing concerns have raised questions about the impact of the Internet, especially social media has on elections. In most European countries, studies have shown that among young people the messages transmitted on social platforms have a considerable impact on voting.

This article addresses the implications of the different ways in which the Internet, through social media, has changed the organization of political campaigns, whether we are talking about the possibility of paying for media campaigns through platforms, or we refer to the use of social media by politicians who present and to discuss their programs, or the way in which political parties, and not only, collect and process the personal data of voters for electoral purposes, or in conducting negative campaigns for counter-candidates by promoting fake news. The purpose of the article is to present the potential problems and effects of viral marketing, including the phenomenon of fake news, which appeared with this movement of the election campaigns in the on-line sector.

2. Transposing electoral campaigns in online

The aspects that had to be clarified over time regarding the transposing of communication / development of electoral campaigns onto the internet via the new media, were as follows:

► **Audiovisual regulation:** until the rise of the Internet and social media, the allocation of time for electoral debates and for the promotion of candidates could be very clearly managed. However, on the internet these things are more difficult to follow, there are regulations from country to country, although each party still has its own campaign carried out on the internet, where it individually sets its time, human and financial resources, etc.;

► **Expenses:** the latter is true when we also refer to expenses. Until the possibility of carrying out marketing campaigns differently, the investments of the parties in this sense could be easier to regulate and follow, as they were until the last decade On the Internet, the budgets invested by each party differ and are more difficult to verify, because they are made both directly and through countless intermediaries;

► New players in the electoral process: creation and invention of algorithms, with the help of which, promotional messages on social networks (especially Facebook) were transmitted personalized and constantly adapted to the preferences and interests of the person, all in order to influence the vote (eg. US elections - Donald Trump). Through this type of campaign, many misinformation and manipulations of the electorate have been made and are being made, which are to a certain extent at the legal border, but without clear rules in this respect, no concrete assessments can be made;

► The appearance of the fake news phenomenon and the viralization of misleading statements: also, through social media, in recent years the phenomenon of fake news has increased considerably and is based on misinformation of the electorate in order to disqualify the opponent. Social media posts do not follow the traditional principles of classical journalism, and by taking advantage of the right to free speech an opinion, they lead to misinformation and undermining the values of truth, compared to classical methods of electoral promoting on TV and Radio where any information transmitted is verified by journalists and state institutions and are in the majority of cases, real;

► Transparency: to conclude, online campaigns are much more difficult to verify, given the fact that terms of transparency of funding and the origin of campaign resources, are difficult to impose online.

3. New Digital Marketing Techniques in politics

When we refer to the new digital marketing techniques applicable in politics, we can list the methods related to online advertising in general, namely: advertising through search engines (triggering keywords, which are written in the search engine), through posts and expressions of interest towards that post, re-targeting (also, depending on certain searches and words, the promoter creates the algorithm which then, retargets the same search as a banner / advertisement on new sites that you visit, no matter of what the users new search is), message targeting (as mentioned, here we refer to the method of creating data extraction techniques, designed to link the personal characteristics of people with political beliefs and identify the political behavior of voters so that political parties attract new voters by sending messages and individualized on specific issues that concern them personally and can be very decisive and precise in the way the person votes, regardless of whether or not they are concerned about the electoral process) (Study on the use of internet in electoral campaigns, 2017). (Study on the use of internet in electoral campaigns, 2017).

4. Identifying new problems associated with New Media methods

Although they have proven to be extremely useful in almost all areas, the new media has a special description when comes to politics and election campaigns. All these new methods applied in the last campaigns all over the world, have raised questions and a concern regarding the legitimacy and correctness of the elections. At present, various states and the European Union are concerned with creating a current framework for election regulation and ethics, obviously covering the way online elections are conducted. Therefore, the issues identified and being worked on for improvement refer to:

- Carrying out a new Regulation on electoral campaigns;
- Improving electoral transparency;
- Campaigning on Wedge Issues - Wedge politics involves treating Aristotle's "Law of the Excluded Middle" as universal. If one side of an issue is right, then the other must be wrong there is no in-between. Controversial topics, forcing people to choose a side, for or against. Voters may feel debates about wedge issues leave no room for nuance. Ultimately, wedge politics isn't about changing people's minds; it's about targeting people who have yet to form an opinion on something;

- Discrimination and the creation of messages only for certain categories of people, those who showed interest in voting in previous elections, sending messages through intermediaries (almost all messages are sent online through intermediaries, which makes it very difficult to accurately identify the person responsible for the problems set;

- Improving Privacy Policies;

- Elaboration and application of measures regarding the follow-up and identification of the financing sources of the campaigns;

- Promotion of fake news - the ethics of journalism is completely canceled online, especially in election campaigns. False news is intensely promoted in order to discredit the candidate against the electorate. Also, this type of identified problem is difficult to avoid, cancel and combat. This phenomenon is currently widespread throughout the world. Donald Trump used such a campaign and took full advantage of the "fake news" phenomenon in his fight to become president of the United States. In the election campaign, a lot of erroneous information was "promoted" in the online environment. Examples of this is Hillary Clinton, who was said to be seriously ill or that she sold weapons to the Islamic State;

- Being viral, this news was even taken over by major news sites and US television, thus contributing to the discrediting of the counter-candidate and the issuance of countless conspiracy theories. Another example of this is the Brexit campaign. It is already well known that the whole Campaign was intensely carried out on Facebook and this contributed major to the success of those who started the detachment from the European Union (HBO even made a film - a documentary on this topic). The really real problem in terms of fake news is strictly related to the ease with which fake news that misleads and manipulates can be published and distributed on social networks. Intentionally or not, social media leads directly to the spread of an erroneous, illegitimate phenomenon, even if at the moment this type of new socialization is appreciated by many as the most important model of free expression of expression and democracy. At the other extreme, paradoxically, the phenomenon of fake news implemented very easily by this "platform of free expression and democracy", becomes a modern weapon against democracy. However, Facebook users are growing in number from one semester to another. The first measures taken in this regard so far, thanks to media pressure and the authorities Facebook took the first anti-fake news measures. A first measure is the button for notifying articles that contain false electoral information. This button helps the individual to report to Facebook moderators the articles posted and which are in fact intended to manipulate public opinion.

5. Methodology Research

In the applied research we compared the credibility of channels through which news is published globally vs those in Romania. Therefore, globally at the beginning of 2020, according to Statista Research Department, 61% of adults who took part in the survey confirmed that they trust the sites searched on search engines and traditional media, declaring these two types of channels as the most reliable in the world. The most unreliable source was social media, especially in Europe and North America.

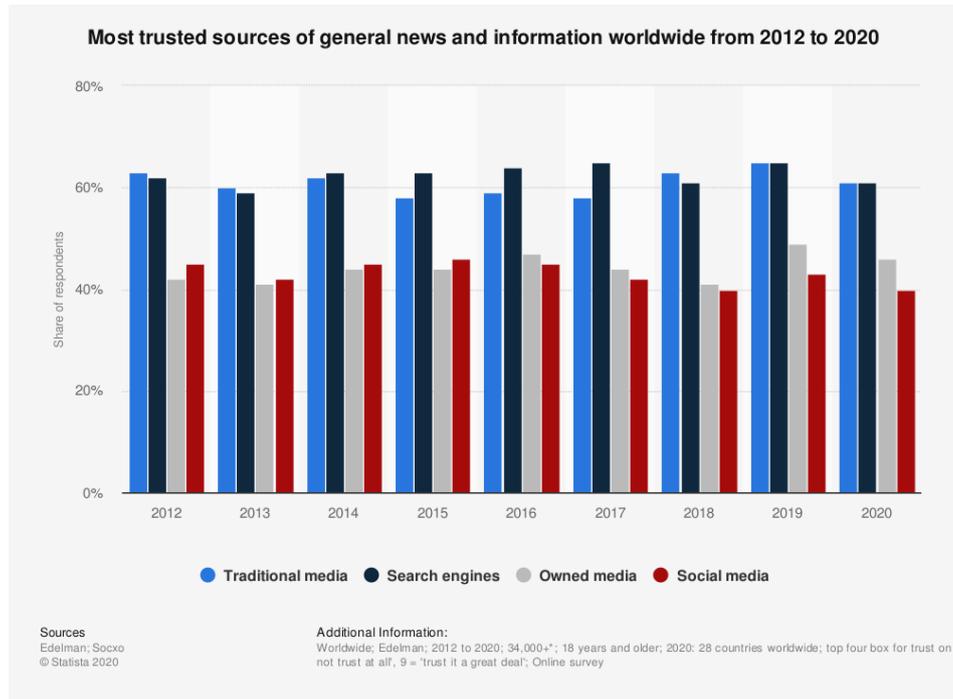


Figure 1. Most trusted sources of general news and information worldwide from 2012 to 2020

Source: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/381455/most-trusted-sources-of-news-and-info-worldwide/>

The reason behind the growing suspicions regarding the confidence in the quality and truth of the news topics published on social media, is the awareness of the fake news phenomenon, especially in light of the latest events related to this phenomenon. The adult population in many countries considered for a long time the news published on social media channels to be real, until, with the passage of time, they realized that the news was false, not presenting the truth. On the other hand, false news is not exactly a recent phenomenon. Since the World Wars, false propaganda and misinformation techniques were used in order to disarm the enemy. Also, as we mentioned before, the last major campaigns in the USA and UK (US presidential 2016 and Brexit UK 2018) were won through fake news campaigns and were subsequently contested and publicly debated.

When we take into account Romania, according to the report made by Novel Research commissioned by MediaStandard.ro, in 2019, it was found that our country is on the same trend as the global population, namely, considers the phenomenon of fake news a very problematic one for the society. Therefore, 55% of those who took part in the study consider that misinformation on social media is a very big problem for our country, in a small decrease compared to 2018. To compare we offer percentages considered by the people surveyed as more important such as criminality with 66%, next to the health system (80.7%), justice and the rule of law (72.2%) and pollution (69.5%). People aged 45-64 are the category most concerned about this phenomenon of manipulation and misinformation. Almost half of the respondents (49%) are aware that false news influences the opinions of the population, while almost 32% of them believe that the phenomenon threatens democracy and that the authorities should do something about it. Also, a fairly significant percentage, 28.4%, believe that although these types of fake news are viral and ultra-promoted, in the end they can still influence. although fought, to some extent the opinions other opinion formers. A positive aspect is that we can see a rising concern by the citizens for the correctness of the electoral processes and for the freedom of press.

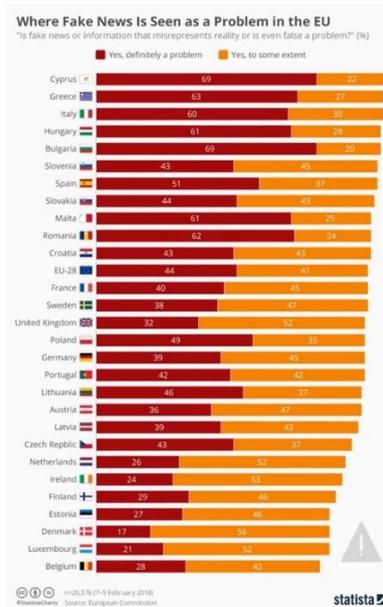


Figure 2. Where Fake News Is Seen as a Problem in the EU (Eurobarometer survey, 2018)
Source: <https://www.statista.com/chart/13285/where-fake-news-is-seen-as-a-problem-in-the-eu/>

Conclusions

When we refer to viral marketing through the phenomenon of fake news, it has come to be considered a very problematic issue in Romania and worldwide. Throughout the world, countries have started to initiate and apply methodologies and laws for such regulations, especially when we talk about election campaigns. The goal is to make them transparent and avoid winning elections through propaganda, manipulation and false news.

Acknowledgments

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