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Real or Virtual?
Political Communication in Romania (2004–2008/9)

ABSTRACT

The civic and political participation is considered to be central to the concept of democracy and it is particularly relevant in the context of contemporary democracies. The participation of citizens in civic or political activities has been a constitutive element of democracy since ancient times. Any discussion of participation needs to acknowledge the space within which the citizens engage. This article will focus on the online engagement and online civic and political participation. The existing studies in literature focus on the analysis of the online election campaigns [Klotz 2005; Xenos, Foot 2005], on the study of the characteristics of the individuals who engage in on-line and off-line activities [Rice, Katz 2004; Weber 2003] or on the identification of the role of the media as a main information source for the voters [Rainie 2005]. This article aims to analyze the main features of the use of new media in political life and the relation between new media and civil society in Romania during 2004–2012. Also the article aims to provide and answer to the following questions: Which were the main characteristics of the usage of new media during the Romanian electoral campaigns 2004–2008/2009? How is the Internet used in the civic life during the non-electoral periods in Romania?

Key words: political communication, political campaigns, online participation, political engagement

INTRODUCTION

The Internet as a free and open space for the development of civil society and political life has become a wide-debated issue during the last few decades. The theories related to the civil society have put particular emphasis on the freedom of individuals,

considering that it is essential when it comes to the civil society in relation to the state [Kumar 1993; Seligman 1992]. The existing literature on the relationship between the Internet and society emphasizes the existing tension between the new communication technologies – considered to be free, in general – and the desire of the political sphere and economic sector to impose restrictions upon them [Bagdikian 2004; Papacharissi 2002; Papacharissi 2004]. On the other hand, the relationship between New Media and the State has been mentioned in numerous studies that analyze the contribution brought by the new communication technologies to the democratization of society [Dertouzos 1997; Sussman 1997; Cigler, Burdett 1998; Bennett, Fielding 1997; Bimber 2001]. Mudhai [2003] asserts that these new information technologies are, in fact, a way to the “third way” for the democratization of the society. Balkin [2004] also points out that the digital revolution brings up the issues of freedom of expression and allows wider participation and a social interaction. Because they are the leading provider of e-democracy, the scholars began to believe that the new communication technologies lead to a larger participation of the citizens in the democratic process [Clift 2003; Coleman 2003; McCullagh 2003; Morrisett 2003; Rushkoff 2003; Norris 1999; Norris 2001].

The new devices and services that are included in the name of “new information technologies”, such as the Internet and mobile telephony, allow citizens not only to participate in the democratic process, but also they are able to make people become active in the community and engage in the democratic process [Suarez 2006; Weber 2003; Gilbreth, Otero 2001; Norris 2001; Bennett, Fielding 1997; Dertouzos 1997; Sussman 1997]. The “Arab Spring” of 2011 is, perhaps, the most recent example of this theory.

The present article tries to fill in a “gap” perceived by the scientific literature as being still under development. The role of the Internet in reshaping the political sphere of some Eastern European democracies – such as Romania – it is by far still less analyzed. The Internet has created new opportunities for political engagement and has changed the way in which Romanian election campaigns and social movements are being realized, “because the Internet is not only a huge network of connected computers but a revolutionary system that has reinvented the way of thinking, the education, the business administration and the governance” [Dobrescu, Bârgăoanu 2001, p. 64]. As shown by a series of rankings realized by Eurostat [2010] in Romania the rate of Internet usability is one of the lowest in the European Union – only 34% of the Romanian population uses the Internet at least once per week [Eurostat 2010]. Another study realized in 2012 [Mitu 2013] showed that in Romania the main sources of information used by the people are: the Internet (98% of respondents) and television (68%). The same study revealed that the main reasons for which the Romanian people choose to use the Internet are diverse, the most common being the necessity (84%) and to get information (83%).

The Romanian election campaigns in 2004, 2007, 2008 and 2009 highlighted the role of the Internet (social networks, websites or micro-blogging) in resetting of the

current political debate in Romania and in decision-making [Momoc 2011; ABC 2010; Holotescu, Ganesh, Grosseck, Bran 2011]. Over time there were numerous articles that analyzed the relationship between the Internet and democracy but in Romania there is still no study that clearly analyzes the role of the Internet in supporting democracy or its potential to offer a space for political or civic engagement. Therefore, this article tries to fill in this gap and aims to provide an answer to the following questions: What are the main features of the use of new media in political life and what is the relation between new media and civil society in Romania for the period 2004–2012? Which were the main characteristics of the usage of new media during the Romanian electoral campaigns from 2004–2008/2009? How is the Internet used for civic activities during the non-electoral periods in Romania?

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are several competing theories about the way in which the Internet and the new technologies of communication influence the current political life [Bimber 2001; Margolis, Resnick 2000; Scheufele, Nisbet 2002; Weber 2003; Wellman 2001; Chadwick 2006; Ward, Vedel 2006]. There were outlined two theoretical opposite positions regarding the impact of the Internet on the political life. The “cyber-optimists” are in the favor of the hypothesis according to which the new information technologies will transform the entire political system, making the direct, participatory and deliberative democracy possible [Morris 1999; Grossman 1996; Toffler, Toffler 1995; Rheingold 1993; Rheingold 2002]. Thus, ahead of the USA election campaign, Morris [1999] considered that the Internet will profoundly transform the electoral process so that politics itself will evolve quickly in the direction of becoming a customized discussion between the political candidates and the voters [Morris 1999]. After the presidential elections in 2004, Trippi [2004] asserted that the Internet will have a decisive role in mobilizing the citizens.

Equally optimistic predictions have also appeared in France. Thus, according to Crouzet [2007], the Internet, because it allows the existence of social networking and the dissemination of information, could contribute to the decline of the “mainstream media” and the emergence of a fifth power in the State, called the “people in touch” [Crouzet 2007].

The empirical results have shown that it is more likely that the rate of participation and involvement in the political life to grow in the case of those citizens who have access to the new communication technologies [Weare 2002]. The theories of political mobilization sustain that the access to information enables the citizens to monitor the actions of Governments and election campaigns [Berry 1984; Bimber 2001]. However, according to the already mentioned theories, the use of new communication technologies also makes possible for some Governments to identify those citizens who engage in the political life, the political engagement being a problematic

issue in those societies where democracy is immature or where the democracy suffers severe limitations [Lynch 2003; Yu 2004]. Some scholars notify us about the dangers brought by the development of the new communication technologies in relation to democracy, civic engagement and freedom [Galston 2002; Streck 1998; Sunstein 2001; Sunstein 2007; Wilhelm 2000; Wilhelm 2004].

According to this perspective, the new information technologies do not cause anything but a minor change in the traditional existing communication flow between the political actors and their audience. The political Web is populated mostly by those who already have an active political life and, as Norris [2003] asserts, the new communication technologies support only this category of people. So, as the authors [Margolis, Resnick 2000] put it, there is a decrease in the democratic potential of the Internet.

These two approaches of the political impact of the use of the new communication technologies, known as “the thesis of engagement” and “the thesis of corroboration” were widely discussed and are still dominating the current literature [Foot, Schneider 2002; Norris 2000]. Placed between these two extreme poles there are some researchers who have adopted a rather pessimistic position towards the ability of the Internet to reinforce democracy, this perspective is known as the theory of “normalization” or as the “policy of normality” [Resnick 1998; Margolis, Resnick 2000]. Avoiding technological determinism, the “normalization” theory considers that the huge resources available to political actors (such as money, bureaucracy, media networks of support) would largely condition their capacity to effectively utilize the Internet for political campaigns or for getting involved in political life in general.

The political engagement of the citizens involves the existence of four dimensions: the vote, the activities related to the political campaigns, the relationship with the authorities and the collective activities [Verba, Nie 1972; Brady, Verba, Scholzman 1995; Jones-Correa, Leal 2001; McLeod, Scheufele, Moy 1999] but, with the advent of the Internet, the political engagement began to take some new different shapes. Therefore Bimber [2005] believes that the traditional theory of collective action should be re-examined in a new context in which the new information technologies play a leading role. The new information technologies might contribute to the approach of the public sphere and the private sphere in a much more fluid way than in the past. Bimber [2005] gives the blogosphere as an example to illustrate the erased borders between these two spheres (public vs. private), many blogs being just personal journals of the authors. In the same direction, Gennaro and Dutton [2006] claim that the high level of interactivity specific to the Internet, associated with the multiplication of alternative channels of communication, can allow users to avoid traditional communication barriers. These two authors claim that the Internet makes possible a new form of political engagement [Gennaro, Dutton 2006].

Scholars talk about the potential of the Internet in promoting a dynamic interpersonal and distinctive information and who can reinvigorate the democratic process both on-line and off-line [Graber, Bimber, Bennett, Davis, Norris 2004; Krueger 2002;

van Dijk 2000]. Thus, the new technologies of communication facilitate distinct types of communication (many to many, one to many and many to one) whose combination can change the participatory behavior faster than it would have been possible through the traditional means of communication [Castells 2007; Silverstone 2005]. Also through the new technologies of communication the on-line and off-line types of political communication seem to be developing simultaneously and complementary [Bennett, Givins 2006; Postmes, Brunsting 2002; Shah 2005].

At the same time, the online engagement alone can develop the traditional political participation, if we take into consideration that some of the costs that are associated with it are reduced compared to the off-line participation [Brady 1995; Verba 1995]. Therefore the individuals are being encouraged to participate in the online political process, increasing the diversity of the current socio-political behaviors.

Furthermore, thanks to the new technologies of communication we can no longer consider that the political participation has only active forms. Behaviors that were considered rather “passive”, such as the support for political activities in general and the exchange of information are now seen as active and included in the political participation [Conway 2000]. According to this perspective we need to redefine two concepts: “commitment” and “civic action”. These two concepts could also contain the connections that people have with the community, not only with the political life [Putnam 1996; Skocpol, Fiorina 1999].

The Internet has become an important component of the existing relationship between politics, civil society and the individual. Taking into consideration the actual trends, Ingelhart [1997] says that in the last decades we have witnessed an increase of the potential for associations and civic movements compared to the political actions. There are a few simultaneous movements that have accompanied this change such as the lost of confidence in the Government, reduction of social capital and an increase in the percentage of citizens who no longer feel close to the civic processes of reaching political decisions. It is no wonder that the moves for civic innovation are expanding. In this case the citizens are able to try the civic participation in a variety of spaces, including community organizations, ecological movements and projects related to health [Sirianni, Friedland 2001].

The scientific literature dedicated to the study of the association of the virtual space and civil society is, however, surprisingly limited compared to the multitude of aspects that are being analyzed when it comes to the approach of politics and the Internet.

There are still a number of interesting studies that point out the impact of the Internet on the actual civic sphere. Yang [2008], for example, showed how the Internet has helped the non-profit organizations in China to transform themselves from active participants to active civil society actors. Jongpil [2007] compared the impact of the Internet on civil society in China and South Korea, showing that in China the Government has used the Internet to increase the surveillance of political activities, while in South Korea the Government has played an important role in the development

of the Internet as a relatively autonomous space. Analyzing the collective action in Hong Kong, Chu and Tang [2005] show that the technology has facilitated new forms of collective action, has cultivated the feeling of belonging to a community and has helped individuals to gather in groups. Yang [2003] says that the social use of the Internet helped the development of the public debate and the consolidation of social topics, redefining the old forms of social organization, facilitating the activities of the existing organizations and leading to the emergence of new forms of Association – such as the virtual communities. Baber’ study [2002] on the use of the Internet in Singapore reveals two simultaneous movements: the increase of the capacity of the State’s surveillance, on the one hand, and, on the other, the development of the public sphere by changing the rules of the society.

Other important studies have shown that the use of the Internet in the civic scheme has led to the increase of the civic engagement, has stimulated the participation to various political events and has led to various civic social movements [Kahn, Kellner 2003; Räsänen, Kouvo 2007; Shah, Kwak, Holbert 2001; Wellman 2001]. The new technologies of communication have become both channels of interaction between citizens, between citizens and the government, as well as means of active participation.

RESEARCH ISSUES

From a chronological point of view, during 2004–2012 there were eight electoral campaigns in Romania: two presidential campaigns (in 2004 and 2009); two legislative campaigns (for the Chamber of Deputies and for the Senate) in 2004 and 2008; two local campaigns – during the same years as the ones that took place for the two chambers of the Parliament – and two campaigns for the European Parliament (in 2007 and 2009) [Ghinea, Mungiu-Pippidi 2010].

Generally speaking, the political regime in Romania is a presidential one, in which the president’s tasks and responsibilities are related to the state’s security and the state’s external relations, but this particular regime sets limits with regards to the president’s involvement in the political, economic and social decisions that are taken at the internal level [Ghinea, Mungiu-Pippidi 2010]. Although, from the Constitution’s point of view, there is a “balance” between the Parliament, President and Government, the period 2004–2012 is dominated by the dynamics of the presidential activity – with implications at the electoral campaigns’ level, which became extremely “personalized” [Ghinea, Mungiu-Pippidi 2010].

When it comes to the peoples’ access to the new information technologies, according to the data provided by International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the Internet usage in Romania has increased almost tenfold during 2000–2010:

Table 1. Internet usage – total population

Year	Number of users	Total population	Percentage from the total population
2000	800,000	22 217,700	3.6 %
2004	4 000,000	21 377,426	18.7 %
2006	4 940,000	21 154,226	23.4 %
2007	5 062,500	21 154,226	23.9 %
2010	7 786,700	21 959,278	35.5 %

(Source: Ghinea, Mungiu-Pippidi 2010)

A survey that analyses the importance of the various mass media (either “traditional” or new media), performed by the Soros Foundation during the electoral year 2009 on a representative sample, shows that three years ago the Romanians’ main means of information were the TV channels, as almost half of this survey’s respondents stated that they watched TV programs daily or almost daily [Romanian Electoral Studies 2011]. A lower share was held by the respondents who stated that they get political information by reading the newspapers (23% of them at least several times a week) or listening to the radio (26%), while extremely few stated that they use the internet for this purpose (6%). At the same time, the data gathered from the same sample indicated that, from all respondents, 86% were not using Internet at all for the purpose of getting information [Romanian Electoral Studies 2011].

From the point of view of the relations that exist between the new communication technologies and the Romanian political life, the existing research argue that the year 2004 is the milestone that marks the beginning of the Internet usage for electoral communication in Romania [Momoc 2011a]. These studies [Gutu 2008] show that 2004 was the year when in Romania were held the first local and presidential elections towards the so-called “digital guerrilla” [Gutu 2008; Momoc 2011a] performed on “user generated content” type sites, where users were the actors that have orchestrated online (mostly negative) campaigns.

While the current president (T. Băsescu) was the first Romanian politician to use the Internet as an instrument for political communication [Gutu 2008], the first politician which has created his own blog was a 2006 candidate for the European Parliament [Ioan Mircea Pascu]; the following year, 2007, was the one that marked the beginning of the Romanian political blogosphere’s “explosion”. In July 2009, this blogosphere comprised 350 blogs belonging to the politicians, while in another ranking made according to the number of blogs held by the politicians of each party, the first place was held by the PSD’s politicians with a total of 132 blogs, followed by PDL with 90 blogs, PNL with 87 blogs, PNTCD with 20 and PC with 11 [Patrut 2011].

Although during 2007–2009 blogging was the dominant trend in using the new communication technologies in the political life, the political use of social networks – especially Facebook – had started during the electoral year 2008, but the role of these networks was truly important only in the case of the electoral campaigns which took place in 2009. One can thus notice an interesting evolution during time: after being extremely important during the years 2006–2008, the blogs became less and less important during recent years, as the place they held in the politicians’ relationship with the rest of the members of society was taken over by the social networks – of the Facebook type – which had a much higher potential for mobilization [Ghinea, Mungiu-Pippidi 2010].

The research questions we are trying to answer throughout the present article are:

1. Which were the main characteristics of the usage of new media (websites, social networks, blogging) during the Romanian electoral campaigns from 2004–2008/2009?
2. How is the Internet used for civic activities during the non-electoral periods in Romania?

HYPOTHESES OF THE RESEARCH

In elaborating the hypotheses of the research we started off with the research questions of the present study, as presented above.

First, we wanted to identify the main characteristics of the usage of new media (websites, social networks, blogging) during the Romanian electoral campaigns from 2004–2008/2009. Based on this, we proposed the following hypothesis:

H1. There is a high probability that the usage of new media during the Romanian electoral campaigns (in the period 2004–2008/2009) had a major direct effect on the voters.

In other words, we expect that the use of the websites, social networks, blogs attracted a significant number of voters in favor of one political party or another.

The second research hypothesis was based on the presumption of a possible association between the use of the new communication technologies with an increase in the involvement and participation in public organizations and policies that are based on volunteering:

H2. During the analyzed time period, there is a high probability that the online activism can be considered as being a form of civic participation.

Thus, we ascertain that we can witness the development if some interactive ways used by citizens when they access and use the Internet that could lead to the development of (political and civic) opinions and attitudes.

ELEMENTS OF METHODOLOGY

In order to offer some answers to these questions, this article favors the methodological triangulation.

First, we made a secondary analysis of the social documents – more exactly, a review of the Romanian studies dedicated to the role of the new communication technologies used in the electoral campaigns that took place during 2004–2010. Using the sociological analysis, we tried to identify the main “themes” and items that linked the elections and vote to the use of new communication technologies.

Second, we deconstruct two case studies concerning the relation between the Internet and the civic life in Romania: the project and action “Crying Houses” and the use of the new communication technologies with the purpose of mobilizing people for the protests organized in January 2011 against the provisions to the new Law of Health. Through a narrative analysis we attempt to identify the elements which can lead us to the validation (or not) of the second research hypothesis.

THE NEW MEDIA AND THE ELECTORAL CAMPAIGNS IN ROMANIA

A study realized in 2012 [Mitu 2013] reveal the rate of participation to the last Romanian electoral campaign (the campaign from 2008/2009). According to this study, 71% of the respondents have participated to the last Romanian elections (2008–2009). The main reasons for which the Romanian people preferred not to vote were: the lack of trust in the political actors, the lack of interest, the belief that the votes were already arranged and their vote does not matter. Although 71% of respondents have participated to the last elections in Romania, only 31% consider themselves to be politically informed, while 47% stated that they consider themselves to be neither informed nor uninformed politically.

The electoral campaigns from 2004 (local, parliamentary and presidential) are the first campaigns that used, for the first time in Romania, a SMS guerrilla campaign and the first electoral campaigns that used an online negative campaign [Gutu 2008; Momoc 2011a]. More exactly, just as various studies show [Momoc 2011b], the current president (T. Băsescu) is the first Romanian politician who had implemented an online electoral campaign in Romania [Momoc 2011a]:

[T. Băsescu] is the first to intuitively realize what advantages does the Internet hold for the political communication. And, although he never had a blog, he managed, through a user generated content site, to mobilize the youth to go to the polling stations and vote [...]. Băsescu had counted on the young peoples’ discontent, on their anti-system rebellion, on their frustrations caused by the politicians of the old regime, on the fact that the young people are present in large numbers in the online medium. Digital guerrilla is an online way of action which mobilizes youth into the political fight to ridicule politicians. The online guerrilla does not involve any debate and it does not urge participants to have a rational dialogue or to di-

scuss the economical and political programs. Digital guerrilla means caricature, humor, irony, having an outlet for one's repressed emotions, mocking the rivals of the favorite candidate.

In fact, the "digital guerrilla" can be considered as the most important use of the new communication technologies during the 2004 electoral campaigns. Introduced as a section with this very name ("Digital Guerrilla") on a candidate's campaign site (more exactly, on the site www.basescu.ro), it allowed visitors to upload and download electoral communication materials but also pamphlets (or caricatures), while the site's owners have declined, from the start, any responsibility for the content posted online by the visitors/ users [Momoc 2011a].

Largely, the campaigns from 2004 – in particular the presidential campaign – have marked the beginning of the "web 2.0" era in the political communication in Romania and the advent of the first successful negative online campaigns from this country. The use of the campaign sites and of the "user generated content" type of site section, had allowed a much cheaper distribution of the electoral messages. Other new communication techniques were based on the spreading the electoral messages and materials through e-mail, mass-messenger and forums. Youtube and other video-sharing sites were added to these means of communication in 2004 and, at the same time with the emergence of blogs and of the Romanian blogosphere, the virtual marketing appeared and began to develop in Romania [Momoc 2011a]. But the 2007 campaign for the European Parliament was the first electoral campaign when the Romanian politicians used blogs as a means of communication with their voters [Aparaschivei 2009]. The studies that were dedicated to this new phenomenon in the Romanian political life [Aparaschivei 2009] indicated the fact that, in the image they projected towards the audience, the Romanian politicians have focused on their human and political features, while leaving their professional features on the second place. Thus, the blog was used by politicians as a "business card" whose purpose was to help politicians self-promote in a positive way [Aparaschivei 2009].

At the same time, the use of blogs by the candidates in the electoral competition also had the purpose of attacking the rivals [Aparaschivei 2009], as the candidates' personal projects were presented by minimizing the counter-candidates' alternatives. During the 2007 electoral process, the communication between politicians and voters had, in fact, entered into a new phase, characterized by the introduction of speaking strategies that were different compared to the ones used by traditional media [Aparaschivei 2009], thus marking, even more, the process of "personalization" of the Romanian political life.

The most important novelty of the 2008 local electoral campaign was the advent of the blogs of the candidates for the functions in the local administration. The traditional campaign sites have registered a lower audience than blogs, as blogs have the advantage of offering not just information, but also opinions which are censored only by the reason and common sense of each author. Still, blogs were a campaign instrument used in the electoral competitions held in the large cities, which had, even during

that time, a relatively extended network allowing access to the Internet, but [blogs] weren't used in the [campaigns] held in the rural areas [Ovidiu Sincai Institute 2008].

With regard to the 2008 campaign for the election of deputies and senators, the rankings that were performed at the time [Patrut 2011] showed that, from the total number of the candidates which were enrolled in the first uninominal campaign, only 54.5% have resorted to using a blog. From all the candidates for the Chamber of Deputies, 85% have used a blog (53 candidates out of 72), while 15% from the candidates for the Senate had used a blog – with the Liberals being the ones who owned most blogs (41%) [Patrut 2011].

Table 2. Candidates which have used the blog during the 2008 electoral campaign for the Parliament

Number of candidates which had a blog from each party	Chamber of Deputies	Senate	Total candidates which had a blog
PNL	22	4	26
PSD+PC	13	4	17
PDL	18	11	29
Total	54	19	72

(Source: Patrut 2011)

More than that, according to the same rankings [Patrut 2011], the candidates-bloggers which have succeeded in attracting a larger number of visitors were, in fact, the very candidates that already had a certain notoriety in the off-line environment. In this particular campaign, although the blog was the politicians' favorite type of new communication technology, the Romanian political blogosphere could not establish itself as an alternative public sphere, as it remained extremely fragmented and polarized [Salcudeanu 2009]. During the 2008 parliamentary elections, the political blog was not a source of information for every interested citizen, but only an opportunity to enter into a dialogue with one's favorite politician [Salcudeanu 2009].

While in the case of the 2004 presidential elections the use of Internet by the winning candidate (T. Băsescu), respectively the site www.basescu.ro, was considered as "an eccentricity", targeting almost exclusively the youth [Momoc 2011a], in the case of the 2009 campaign for the election of Romania's president the Internet was, for the first time, used intensively by all the political candidates.

Following a radicalization of the electorates which were loyal to the main political parties (PD-L, PSD, PNL), during the period 2004–2009 [Nastuta 2010] the electoral speech during this campaign was characterized by an increased aggressiveness of the language and an excessive emotionality of the reactions expressed in the virtual space. Although this emotionality was also a reflection of what was happening in the

media, one of the main candidates (T. Băsescu) was the one who took advantage of it and turned it strategically in his favor [Nastuta 2010], through the creation of numerous anti-PSD and anti-communism communities, which were in fact the multipliers of his messages against his main counter-candidate (M. Geoană).

The rankings from that time [Nastuta 2010] indicate that there were three “sources” of online attack used by the candidate T. Băsescu: secondary “attack” websites: (<http://www.televizorulpresedinte.ro/>; <http://nufigeoana.ro/>; <http://www.noicuvoi.ro/>; www.decebasescu.ro); the forum of his official site or the site presenting him as a candidate (www.basescu.ro) and various personal blogs belonging to some of his sympathizers; websites that were apparently neutral, but which had highlighted a series of issues that were eroding the counter-candidate’s image (www.vreusafiupresedinte.com). As Nastuta [2010] points out, the main reason for using websites and blogs in the presidential campaign was “the aggressiveness towards his adversary”. But the viral messages, in video or photo formats, which have appeared on blogs or on YouTube, the comments and interventions against the political adversaries that were posted on various websites that were favorable to them, the dissemination of messages on Twitter or Facebook, the development of online games – these were the instruments of the online negative electoral campaign that were used by all the participants in the presidential political competition [Nastuta 2010; Momoc 2011a].

With regard to the analysis of the blogs of the candidates in the presidential campaign, the analysis works performed [Momoc 2011], are indicating the fact that [Momoc 2011a]:

... in 2009, the campaign blog did not constitute a fundamental medium for expressing electoral messages [...]. The candidates, in general, have manifested a minor interest in this type of communication.

Thus, the main competitor in 2009 (T. Băsescu) was the only one among all candidates who never had a blog; he had used a site with web 2.0 elements of interaction, which was turned off right after the results of the campaign were released. With regard to the activity of the candidates which have had a blog during the electoral campaign, the studies performed show that, during the entire electoral period, the UDMR’s candidate (K. Hunor) had only three posts on his campaign blog, the PNL’s candidate (C. Antonescu) had 13 posts and the candidate who had entered in the second ballot (M. Geoană – PSD) had 29 posts [Momoc 2011].

Besides campaign blogs and sites, the 2009 electoral campaign had also marked, on one side, the beginning of the intensive use of social networks, especially Facebook, and on the other side the more dynamic use of personalized video-sharing channels, of the type of YouTube. During the same period of the 2009 presidential campaign, on the official YouTube channel of PDL’s candidate (T. Băsescu) have been posted 19 political videos [Momoc 2011], out of which 16 had a positive attitude, 7 were electoral promotion videos, while 12 were videos which presented the meetings with

the voters. During the same time interval, on the main counter-candidate's official YouTube channel (M. Geoană – PSD) were uploaded 87 videos (6 electoral promotion videos and 81 campaign video materials), out of which in 76 videos the attitude was positive [Momoc 2011a].

Related to the online social networks, one can also notice the fact that they weren't used by the main competitor in 2009; more precisely, T. Bănescu did not have a Facebook page, just as he did not have a blog [Momoc 2011c]. With regard to the online activity of the other candidates, have been recorded 77 posts on the PSD candidate's Facebook page (M. Geoană) and the same candidate received 4,368 "likes". The third candidate (C. Antonescu – PNL) has had 103 posts on his Facebook page and received 17,451 "likes" [Momoc 2011c].

In a similar way to the situation from 2008, the political blogosphere of the electoral year 2009 was devoid of interactivity, as the candidates/ bloggers refused to enter into a dialogue with the readers/ voters [Momoc 2011a]. Although the social networks are offering, at a general level, more opportunities for social interaction, this was also a case in which the communication potential of the new communication technologies did not lead to the establishment of an alternative space for public debate in that electoral year. Thus, the study dedicated to the 2009 presidential campaign is showing that [Momoc 2011]:

... the absence of the links to the competition's posts and the lack of dialogue with the readers are expressing a concern for one's own image and a significant lack of interest for the debate between candidates, but also between voters and politicians. The candidates did not put forth a dialogue about ideas or projects and did not answer to the readers' questions or comments.

Through their use of the new information technologies, almost all parties and candidates were analyzed based on their activities during the 2004, 2007, 2008 and 2009 campaigns and all of them were mainly interested in offering information and not in mobilizing the potential citizens/ voters. Besides the already standardized elements – such as the feedback, the e-mail address provided for contact and the news groups – the parties and the candidates have rarely taken measures in order to intensify the direct interaction with the electorate [Bosoteanu 2011]. The Internet users have received too little encouragement to develop a frequent, coherent and direct dialogue with the political actors, as the control of messages was often activated in the online environment [Bosoteanu 2011].

NEW MEDIA DURING THE NON- ELECTORAL PERIOD

In his analysis dedicated to the Romanian blogosphere, Botan [2009] stresses the fact that the active Internet users are considering themselves as a part of a community and adopt rituals which confirm this belonging and membership.

The active users of internet are developing sociability networks and are delineating criteria for membership, while the blogs are taking over, for all users, the function of personal identity.

During the period 2009–2011, the Romanian virtual community has formed in relationship with or in opposition towards a certain issue or a certain public character that was brought into the spotlight by the traditional media (print media, radio and TV) [Botan 2009]. In the context of the transmission of a certain authority and legitimacy from the traditional media towards the online environment, the researchers appreciate that the sphere in which the simple citizens are expressing themselves was represented only in a minimal measure [Botan 2009]. It is no wonder that after a period of expansion during 2007–2009, the number of active and influential blogs tends to decrease in the last three years [Ghinea, Mungiu-Pippidi 2010]. Also after 2009 the interest for online activities has increased. When it comes to the online engagement in non- electoral periods a study realized in 2012 [Mitu 2013] shows that 55% of the participants to the study had signed online petitions on social networking sites, the main reasons for signing the online petitions were the desire to support the cause and the interest in the subject of the petition. 14% of the respondents have participated in online campaigns carried out by Romanian NGOs, the main reason being: from to support the cause of the NGO in question or because they were already volunteers of the NGO in question. In terms of involvement in civic activities, 35% of the respondents said that they had engaged in volunteer work, the main reason for becoming a volunteer was the desire to help other people who are in difficult situations. Other reasons for engaging in voluntary work were gaining professional experience or the self- satisfaction for the work done. As regards the reasons for the lack of online engagement of the Romanian people, more than half of the respondents do not engage in any civic activities through the Internet due to lack of time or the distrust in the activities of the Romanian NGOs, while others said they would like to get involved in civic activities, but they are not informed enough, they do not find out when these activities take place. When it comes to the reasons for becoming an active citizen, 37% of the participants would like to become active citizens if they would see results of their involvement, 18% of the participants would like to become active citizens if that would increase the number of other people involved in such activities, 17% of the participants would become active citizens if they had confidence that their opinion really matters.

There were situations in Romania when the new communication technologies have been used by segments of society in innovative ways which have led to unexpected results.

A first example of civic action in which the new technologies have been incorporated successfully is provided by the site “Houses which are crying” (<http://www.casecareplang.ro/>). In 2006, a group of students from the Architecture Faculty has initiated the “Houses which are crying” project, with the purpose of raising the level of public awareness about the destruction of the historical buildings in Bucharest. The project had involved the creation of an online database with pictures of some historical buildings (dating from period spanning from the middle of the 19th century to the interwar period of the 20th century) which were abandoned or whose demolition was imminent [Visan 2011].

While time passed, the project “Crying Houses”, that was initially meant to increase awareness about the threats faced by the memory of the Bucharest’s architecture, became an act of civic involvement, as it extended off-line under the form of several photo exhibitions organized in unconventional spaces (such as Bucharest’s subway), the partnership established with the Order of the Architects, the workshops organized together with schools and the partnerships closed with the governmental institutions (such as the Presidential Administration) [Visan 2011].

The actions performed as part of the project “Crying Houses” have also enjoyed the coverage received in traditional media (news programs and articles in newspapers) [Visan 2011]. At the same time with the issuing of the 2009 Report of the Presidential Commission for Patrimony, where a series of arguments is based on the documentation offered by the site (and then the association) “Crying Houses”, we are dealing with the bringing into the governmental and political debate of an action which had started as an online site and had succeeded to bring the issue of Bucharest’s urban patrimony at the level of public debate [Visan 2011].

The second example refers to the use of social networks – in this case, the use of Facebook – in organizing civic protests. Used for the first time with this purpose in September 2010, when more than 70 journalists have organized a flash-mob in front of the building of the Ministry of Finance in order to protest against the changes in taxation [Ghinea, Mungiu-Pippidi 2010], Facebook had demonstrated its potential for social mobilization in January 2012. Following the events in chronological sequence, on the 11th of January 2012, following a TV contradictory debate with the president Băsescu about the new Law of Health, a state secretary from the Ministry of Health (who is also the founder of the main service that provides emergency medical assistance in Romania – SMURD) – Raed Arafat – had resigned from his function. It is about a public figure who has an exceptional visibility in Romania and a person that is not associated to any political party, being perceived by the majority of the people from the public as being a “technocrate”. Just as the sociologists’ comments show [Dâncu 2012]:

Even if we didn't "measure" him too often in opinion polls, Arafat was almost a myth, with an almost 90% awareness and 70% trust, higher than the levels reached by the Church's Patriarch or the National Bank's governor. SMURD, the firefighters and the ambulance were the institutions most trusted by the public, with tens of percentage points above the army of even the church.

Next day, on the 12th of January 2012, takes place the first public manifestation in favour of Raed Arafat and SMURD, in Targu Mureş city, where the action initiated on Facebook had gathered between 2,000 and 4,000 people [Antoniou, G. 2012; Ramadan 2012; Giurgea 2012]. In less than three days, 12–15 January 2012 – as a result of the national mobilization performed on Facebook, have taken place demonstrations in favor of SMURD in twenty county seat cities and in the country's capital (Bucharest). These off-line movements, but which were generated online, have taken place while at the middle of the given time interval – on the 13th of January 2012 – the controversial draft of the Law of Health was withdrawn and Raed Arafat was asked to come back to the function he held before at the Ministry of Health [*Adevărul* Local Editorial Offices Network 2012].

Started as a movement with a strictly social purpose – in favor of a person and a social health service (SMURD) – the action had transformed after 17th of January 2012 (the date when Raed Arafat had returned in the function of state secretary in the Ministry of Health) into a political movement whose purpose was the change of the current government, with manifestations that were held in various cities taking place until February 2012 [RADOR 2012]. During the same period (11–15 January 2012) on Facebook were created 34 pages in support of Raed Arafat and 105 pages in support of SMURD. The popularity of these pages varied, as the number of "Likes" they received has varied between a few dozens to more than 2,500, while the same thing happened with the number of supporters ("followers"). More than that, during the same time interval, the comments posted on these pages were not political, they were just human life stories, or opinions and appreciations related to the activity of dr. Raed Arafat and SMURD:

Vali Costache: My dad died in 2007 in the ambulance. I am convinced that, if SMURD had existed where it happened (in Vatra Dornei), this tragedy would not have happened. I have all the respect for such a man.

Adriana Florentina Vaduva: 30 minutes had managed to spare my father from going to the world beyond this one. SMURD made the difference. I bow with respect!

Petrina Gherman: ... I had a serious car accident (from 7 cars, we were the ones who were hit the worst). SMURD had saved our life, mine, my husbands' and my daughters' ... what more can I say? Respect for Raed Arafat!

(Source: "Respect pentru Raed Arafat", 11th of January 2012)

In the case of the protests initiated on Facebook during 11–15th January 2012, we believe we are dealing with the first ample online social movement that took place in Romania and in which the role of the social networks was the one of civic (later political) triggering and mobilization [Antoniou, G. 2012; Ramadan 2012; Giurgea 2012].

CONCLUSIONS

The new information technologies are currently considered as having a central role in facilitating the access and participation to the political life [Bennett, Fielding 1997; Becker 2001; Harwit, Clark 2001; Snellen 2001; Drezner, Farrell 2004]. These technologies are facilitating the fast accumulation and dissemination of the interactions, communication and group collaboration [Norris 1999]. At the same time, they have a civic role, as they allow to an increasing number of citizens to participate at the public debate and become familiar with the opinions and events that have an influence over their daily life [Jankowski, van Selm 2000; La Porte 2001; Oates 2003].

A series of empirical analysis reveal the way in which parties and political candidates have used websites or the new communication technologies in order to reach their voters and mobilize their supporters [Schneider, Foot 2004; Schneider, Foot 2005]. Thus, the results indicate that the new communication through Internet is characterized mainly by the predominance of the “top-down” information, while in this way the interactive horizontal communication with supporters and voters is diminished a lot [Foot, Schneider 2006; Jackson, Lilleker 2009; Jackson 2007; Benoit, Benoit 2002; Margolis 1999; Margolis 2003]. In this way, the normalization hypothesis is confirmed [Margolis 1999; Margolis 2003], as it is possible for the important political actors from the off-line world to be able to use the new communication technologies in a more efficient way.

The rather moderate conclusions related to the impact of the Internet over the political life are based on studies made in democracies with a long tradition, but for the countries which have political legitimacy issues or a strictly controlled media system, the empirical research are showing that the Internet can play an important even decisive role [March 2006; March 2004; Semetko, Krasnoboka 2003; Shynkaruk 2005; Rheingold 2002]. Therefore, the issue of the political impact of the Internet cannot be generalized without considering the media and political context [Anstead, Chadwick 2009; Sey, Castells 2004].

Our secondary analysis validated both the first and the second research hypotheses. Thus, from the perspective of the relations that exist between the political, it was obvious that at the level of participation and of the new communication technologies, the Internet did not have a major direct effect in the Romanian electoral campaigns – and from here the first research hypothesis was validated (“There is a high probability

that the usage of new media during the Romanian electoral campaigns had a major direct effect on the voters”). The use of the new communication technologies did not attract a significant number of voters in favor of one political party or another, because most visitors were anyway belonging to the area of the sympathizers of the political actor (party or candidate) that owned the respective blog, site or Facebook page [Nastuta 2010]. Instead, the political use of the new information technologies did have a message multiplication effect and has allowed the mobilization (radicalization) in the geographical area of the party members and the sympathizers of that candidate or party [Nastuta 2011]. Just as Momoc shows about the 2009 presidential campaign [Momoc 2011a]:

The blogosphere and the popular Facebook network have fragmented the virtual space in 2009, the candidates have isolated from each other according to their ideology, the online channel has worked less as a debate platform and more like a political PR instrument. The online environment, which was going through a *cyber-balcanization* process, was the faithful mirror of the off-line environment.

During the Romanian electoral campaigns, especially those that took place in the 2007–2009 interval both political blogs and social networks – such as Facebook – did not manage to democratize the electoral competition, as they have largely preserved the power relations and the discrepancies between the electoral capitals that existed in the off-line environment [Momoc 2011c; Patrut 2011]. We can thus notice that, such as in the countries with relatively “mature” democracies, the thesis of “normalization” induced by the use of Internet in the political life was, in this way, validated in Romania, too.

For the second research hypothesis (“During the analyzed time period, there is a high probability that the online activism can be considered as being a form of civic participation.”) the two mini-case studies we have presented previously – the project “Crying Houses” and the implication of the new communication technologies in the mobilization and protest actions that have taken place in January 2011 – proved that, in the case of Romania, the online activism can be considered as being a form of civic participation. This new form of on-line civic participation is just as important as the “traditional” forms of civic participation. In this way, in a country with a “young” democracy, as it is the case of Romania, the facilities offered by the new communication technologies can transform the online debates into significant acts of citizenship [Visan 2011] able to gain relevance at the offline political level. Our analysis is, thus, in line with the studies that have shown that the discussions on political themes and the consumption of political news are stimulating various forms of civic participation [Sotirovic, McLeod 2001]. The interactive online technologies, such as e-mail, instant messaging, online chat and online comments, are also allowing the development of some opinions and civic attitudes which are not just strictly political [Price, Cappella 2002]. The Internet allows people [Lupia, Sin 2003, p. 316]:

... to post, at minimal cost, messages and images that can be viewed instantly by global audiences.

Quan-Haase and Wellman [2004] have shown that the Internet has introduced alternative ways of intra-group involvement, which are different from the simple formal quality of being a member of the groups and associations that exist at a certain time in a society. In addition to this, a series of rankings shows that the intensive use of the Internet is associated with a high level of participation in public organizations and policies that are based on volunteering [Wellman, Haase, Witte, Hampton 2001].

In our opinion, the Romanian results (e.g. the influence exercised by new communication technologies on the increase of people's civic participation) can be assessed as contradicting Putnam's thesis [1996], according to which the contemporary societies are facing a decrease of the social capital and this takes the shape of a weaker participation of citizens in the life of the civic organizations [Putnam, 1995]. On the contrary, the civic purpose use of the new communication technologies in Romania is, in fact, validating the thesis [Norris 1999; Postmes 2002; Suarez 2006] according to which the use of the new communication technologies can lead to the increase of the degree of awareness about the community problems and, in this way, the individuals' involvement in the political life is encouraged [Mutz 2006; Walsh 2004].

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