THE IMPACT OF VIDEOS IN THE ONLINE POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

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Abstract: *The paper explores the power of video as a communication and persuasion technique particularly delivered through social media platforms. It is also illustrated why demand for video is stronger than ever, in light of the exciting new technologies. There is an empirical evidence that voters and consumers of messaging are influenced in a far greater manner by videos than by messaging on other platforms (billboards, newspapers, radio, posters). Micro-targeted advertising is the new technology that dramatically improves the impact of videos. The advantage of micro-targeting resides in the ability to target small segments of public with specific messages, a process which increases the efficient of the entire campaign and reduces costs. We analyze the impact of videos in the online communication, particularly on Facebook and YouTube. We show that the most engaging posts are the videos (video commercials, video news, videos about events, compared to links, photos, status, album or others) we they are the highest on the top overview regarding interactions, reactions, comments or shares. We used different tools to investigate the performances of Facebook pages or of other web pages and digital content, and also to analyze the community behavior (number of views, shares, likes, interactions, reactions, comments, etc.).*

Keywords*: video; micro-targeting; Facebook; political campaign; trends*

1. INTRODUCTION

In the social media era, "the making visible is an explicit strategy of individuals who know very well that mediated visibility can be a weapon in the struggles they wage in their day-to-day life" (Thompson, 2005:31). This "new visibility" is "freed from the special and temporal properties of here and now" and "its specific properties varied from one medium to another" (Thompson, 2005:35). Thompson (2005) analyses the implications of visibility on the politician profile and emphasized that Interned enabled a never seen before extension of the visibility, which came together with the difficulty "to control the flow of symbolic content" and "to ensure that the images made available to individuals are those they would wish see circulated" (Thompson, 2005:38). The politicians "are more exposed to the risk" that their actions "may be disclosed in ways that conflict with the images they wish project", and becoming "a new and distinctive fragility" (Thompson, 2005:42). The politician task may be even more difficult, since there is a huge communication between his/her publics of supporters and/or opponents. This is a shift of "communication paradigm": the consumers (in case of products or companies) not only discuss with the company about its products, but also with other consumers (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). But a range of methods "to shape the consumer discussions in a manner that is consistent to the company" (or politician) are available to managers or politicians: networking platforms, blogs, social media (Mangold & Faulds, 2009).

For a business, YouTube can be used for various aims: it is a low-cost online marketing, brand awareness, product recall, retail promotion, for direct sales, product support, internal training, employee communications or recruiting. There can be informative videos, educational videos, entertaining videos, product presentations and demonstrations, customer testimonials, company introductions, business video blogs, executive speeches, company seminars and presentations (Miller, 2011).

2. VIDEOS AND THE NEW MEDIUM

2.1 The new audience. Internet and social media have transformed us from "read only"

audiences, able only "to read newspapers, but not writing for them", into "read and write" audiences (Hartley, 2008:26). "The mode of address" also has changed, from "convincing us to give our loyalty to a party or a brand" to a new one, "seeking to converse with customers who might also be suppliers, competitors or partners" (Hartley, 2008:27).

Hartley (2008:112) defines "this mode of cultural meaning making as <redaction>", respectively "the production of new material by the process of editing existing content", and the present time as a "redactional society" – "characterized by its editorial practices", "when there is too much instantly available information for anyone to see the world whole", and where "the reduction, not the original writings […] determines what is taken to be true, and what policies and beliefs should follow from that."

2.2 YouTube, Facebook and "relationship cultivation" . YouTube provides us the right tools not only to read and write, but also to produce our "movies" and to publicly and instantly distribute them on a global "TV" channel. Uploading our productions on YouTube is a "meaning-making process, rather than an attempt to evade the constraints of mainstream media distribution mechanisms"; it functions "as a central clearing house service that people use as a way to catch up media events, as well as to break new stories and raise awareness, as in the citizen journalism model" (Burgess & Green, 2009:49). Blackshow and Nazzaro (Blackshaw & Nazzaro, 2006:4) define the "consumer generated content" as "a mixture of fact and opinion, impression and sentiment, founded and unfounded tidbits, experiences and even rumour" (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010:180).

YouTube not only broadcasts our productions, but also enable the audiences to instantly assess them, using popularity scales: Most Viewed, Most Favorited, Most Responded, Most Discussed (Burgess & Green, 2009:40).The four categories of popularity work according to "different logic of audience engagement" (Burgess & Green, 2009, pp. 38-40). Although they make quantitative assessments, Most Responded, Most Discussed and Most Favorited represent "measures of attention" and "popularity", based on "activities that signal a degree of participation in the YouTube community (Burgess & Green, 2009:40). Most viewed is more closed to the traditional media "eyeballs in front of the screen" indicator. The videos on YouTube have two origins: either the "traditional media" or directly from users themselves – "user-created" that should "co-exist and collide" in the space of the YouTube, but they do not "really converge": traditional mass media content is meeting "amateur oddities" (Green & Burgess, 2009:41-42).

Thelwall, Sud and Vis conducted a research about the discussion on YouTube and found that religion "seemed to be the bigger trigger for discussion", and the videos with the least discussion were about music, comedy and how to and style (Thelwall *et al.*, 2012). Their research also revealed that "the typical comment was mildly positive, was posted by a 29 year old male and contained 58 characters" and YouTube, together with other online video services become "part of the political process in some countries" (US, South Korea) (Gueorguieva, 2008), (Chang, 2008). During the 2008 US Presidential elections campaign, YouTube acted like a "site for both top-down and grass-roots political campaign (Burgess & Green, 2009:50). Tyron (2008) highlights the political parody role in 2008 elections in USA. These videos often "operate within the larger nexus of overlapping, and often competing, campaign narratives" (Tyron, 2008:200). Parodies use the techniques of "reiteration, inversion, misdirection" (Harris, 2000), "exaggeration" or "humor", "finding their way into the online videos" (Tyron, 2008:210). Tyron concludes that videos' primary purpose is more pedagogical, sometimes informing viewers of the candidates' policies, but more often remind us of the ways in which campaign narratives and candidate images are constructed" (2008:213).

Facebook is the most popular social networking among students (Cheung, Chiu, & Lee, 2011, 1337). They consider shorter videos and informal talking-head videos as "more engaging" and demand the video presentations to be made purposely in online video format (Guo, Kim, & Rubin, 2014). There are three main strategies in "relationship cultivation": disclosure, distribution of information and interactivity (Waters *et al.*, 2009:103). Cheung et. al consider that "the social networking sites give everyone a place to share their personal stories in words, pictures and videos with their friends", appreciating "the social related factors (maintaining interpersonal interconnectivity and social enhancement) and entertainment values." (Cheung et al., 2011:1340).

Considering the characteristics of the social media briefly presented up to now, it seems that the practitioners of public relations and any other kind of communicators "should rethink" *(Waters et al.*, 2009:106) their messages and means to communicate to their audiences (stakeholders, publics), firstly because of the richness of tools

and instruments social media make available to all of us, equally producer and consumer of content, and secondly, because the minimum control they have upon this kind of new visibility.

3. GENERAL TRENDS IN ONLINE MARKETING

3.1 Consumer demand and behavior. Marketing is based on predicting consumer demand and customer behavior through the identification of the trends and narratives, particularly when we consider the political electoral campaigns. Several important trends and patterns could be tracked in the current online environment. We present here only four important trends that should be considered for any communication campaign. First of all, we note that social media has become the mainstream and all campaigns consider Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, for example, as important tools of influence which can be used to shape public beliefs, attitudes and behaviors. According to some studies, more than 60% of US adults are getting their news from social media, compared to 49% in 2012 (NATO, 2016). Also, 90% of marketing professionals consider social media as the most popular content marketing tactic of B2C (Moore, 2016).

Secondly, the explosive growth of mobile device usage and the improvement in network speeds and technology makes mobile Internet access quite accessible. It seems that revenue from mobile advertisements will grow from $3.54 billion in 2015 to $13.3 billion by 2020 (Rodgers & Thorson, 2017).

Thirdly, micro-targeted advertising is the new technology that dramatically improves the efficiency of marketing campaigns. The advertising technology is based on collecting a vast array of big data using digital and social media platforms and uses the results to better target voters, taking into account not only demographic factors, but also psychometric profiling, preferences, hobbies, online behaviors, spending habits, etc. The advantage of micro-targeting resides in the ability to target small segments of public with specific messages, a process which increases the efficient of the entire campaign and reduces costs. During the campaign, we used the gained insights to increase reach and engagement by publishing improved content at the right time. Using mobile devices to aggregate data, campaigns could be targeted on personality based models. Effective social media campaigns are increasingly rooted in data, a necessary ingredient for a successful political campaign. In this sense, David Gewirtz shows that

> what you buy, what you read, what you share online, who you associate with, what your mood is, where you work, what you do, what your health situation is, where you've donated, what clothing styles you like, what car models you buy, your favorite Cola brand, your favorite phone brand — all of that information is available to those with the budget to buy it and the algorithms to aggregate and sift through it. This is where big data is changing the face of American election politics. (Patterson, 2016*b*).

And it seems that this is just the beginning of a new era in communications. Alexander Nix, the CEO of Cambridge Analytica, the data firm behind Trump's campaign, and also of Brexit campaign, claims that we should move even forward, towards you-targeting:

> We use nearly 5 thousand different data points about you to craft and target a message and the data points are not just a representative model of you. The data points are about you, specifically (Patterson, 2016*a*).

The data is collected from various large vendors and enriched with social media information for discovering the "core personality traits" and motivating triggers.

Finally, the fourth emerging trend is the dramatic growth in video, and particularly mobile video, in traffic data. It is projected that in 2017 74% of online traffic will be video-based (Moore, 2016:132) and by 2019, 80% of global internet traffic will be dominated by video (NATO, 2016). Mobile video will increase 9-fold between 2016 and 2021, accounting for 78 percent of total mobile data traffic by the end of the forecast period (Cisco, 2017).

Fig.1 Growth in video/ mobile video traffic data. Note: Figures in parentheses refer to 2016 and 2021 traffic share.

According to some surveys, 72% of businesses who use video believe that it has improved the conversion rate of their website and a surprising 98% of users say that an explainer video helped them to learn more about a product of a service and

a social video generates 1200% more shares than text and images combined (Moore, 2016:132).

The findings should not be that surprising as a video is worth 1,8 million words, as some theoreticians claim, video being the most effective ingredient of a strategic communication campaign as can increase "outreach to influencers, build credibility, promote brand awareness, enhance SEO, loyal following of brand ambassadors" (Luttrell, 2016:113). For example, streaming video deliver three times higher brand awareness and message association and more than 100% higher purchase intent and online ad awareness than non-rich media ads (Walter & Gioglio, 2014:70). Moreover, marketers should take into account that one in four consumer lose interest in a company if it doesn't have video (O'Neill, 2015) and that 92% of mobile video consumers share videos with others (Kolowich, 2016).

What we should learn about using videos in marketing is that as most forms of social media, videos should not sell anything; they should be interesting and useful in order to make people resonate. Numerous studies show that messages, and videos as well, that are noticed, liked and shared are built on emotional appeals and/or display relevant information (Rodgers & Thorson, 2017). Posting simple images or videos is not enough for an efficient campaign, as companies should try to create content which embrace a compelling visual storytelling in order to drive traffic and engage public (Walter & Gioglio, 2014:7). Video disseminated through social media is the new "word of mouth" as it is more enthusiastically received by a viewer if it was forwarded by a friend. In the electoral campaigns this tactic is largely used and it is becoming more powerful than television advertisements (Sheldon, 2015). Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook's CEO, considers that video "allows people to express themselves in richer ways." Facebook users are now consuming 4 billion video views per day, 75 percent being on mobile devices (Litsa, 2017).

The major advantage of using social media is that the campaign can be targeted as it is possible to use sociodemographic information about those using social media. Voter segmentation has always been a fundamental ingredient in the electoral campaigns, but the use of "big data" has brought the entire process to a new level, much more sophisticated. In 2012, the messages of Obama's campaign were tailored for 26 different segments (Sheldon, 2015), while in Trump's campaign, the fine-tuning reaches the smallest groups, villages or apartment blocks, even individuals, as Alexander Nix explains (Grassengger & Krogerus, 2017). Using psychometric profiling, Cambridge Analytica divided the US population into 32 personality types and targeted these groups with different types of messages, including videos.

Obama campaign, however, was one of the most memorable campaigns and that was due to the fact that it used extensively videos for engaging the voters. The campaign uploaded 104,454 videos, viewed 889 million times and The *Yes We Can* video and MoveOn video drew views of over 13 million and over 20 million respectively (Stromback & Kiousis, 2011:132). Some studies show that the most prominent online political activities in 2008 were watching online political videos, using social network Web sites, and making political contributions (Stromback & Kiousis, 2011:300).

The point here is, as some authors show, that video allows the "the institutional *dissemination* of inventive thinking" and, moreover, video permits *participation* in inventive thinking (Arroyo, 2013). There are several clear advantages for advertising on mobile phones as the advertisers can get important information about their potential clients: users location, the time the ad can be delivered when users use the device, users' profile, interests, preferences, behaviors, needs, activities, demographics and characteristics of the surrounding environment (Rodgers & Thorson, 2017).

Taking into consideration only these four trends and bringing them together we can conclude that any future of advertising and marketing campaign, including political marketing, should include, as a must, the ingredients mentioned above. It should include social media as a mainstream, to focus on mobile video and to use powerful data for segmenting the target. As we can notice, the future is here: we have already seen this happening successfully in Trump's campaign and Brexit campaign and it is already happening, at a certain level, in the commercial advertising. The use of social media include the advantages: access to politically relevant information, a shift from the uni-directional flow of information toward peer sharing, the possibility for people to enable the campaign message to their friends ("tell-a-friend"), a better cost-benefit ratio compared to TV ad, quick results, a level of intimacy as people share posts with friends and family while on television a candidate appears distant and less intrusion compared to e-mails (Sheldon, 2015).

4. SOCIAL MEDIA, MICRO-TARGETING AND VIDEO IN THE ELECTORAL CAMPAIGN IN ROMANIA

We exemplify the effectiveness of the use of social media, the micro-targeting and the extensive

use of video with an analysis of the electoral campaign we managed in December 2016 in a North-East region of Romania. We run the campaign for a center right-wing party which was competing against other parties, several center right-wing parties as well and a major left-wing competitor, viewed as the main opposition party to the government at that time. The campaign was directed in several big directions, including door-to-door canvasing, TV advertising, distribution of printed materials, mass-media advertisement and, as a major component, the online campaign. According to our post-elections evaluation, the initial goals of the campaign have been achieved thanks to the online campaign.

We conducted a public opinion survey and through cross-tabulations we were able to identify the possible target of our campaign, more precisely, the groups of people from which we were able to get the votes. Then, we succeeded to compile a relatively large amount of data about the voters in that region, particularly from their online behavior, such as users' profile, interests, needs, activities, demographics and more specifically, about their political interests and biases. Through complex analyses we were able to segment the audience in several major audiences and we tailored the online campaign for these different audiences. We identified, for example, the voters of various parties involved in the electoral campaign, the voters of our party and, with a certain degree of precision, even the undecided voters.

We used AdWords campaigns, Google search, display ads and Facebook campaigns corroborated with a mass-media online campaign. Basically, we were reaching these various groups with different messages, tailored accordingly for maximum impact, either in the form of advertorials in the online mass-media (often multimedia article which included videos) or through displaying video clips. Using various social media analytics, such as Socialbakers Analytics, we were permanently tracking the effectiveness of the campaign, tracking for example, every Like, Share, Comment across individuals and brand profiles of interest, the growth and distribution of fans, the most engaging posts, the evolution and distribution of interactions, the user activity, the most engaging post types and so on.

In the Facebook analysis, for example, we noticed that the first six most engaging posts were various videos, each of them having many tens of thousands of views, thousands of interactions, reactions, comments and shares. From the analysis of the most engaging post types it clearly resulted that videos have been the most engaging posts on Facebook during the electoral campaign.

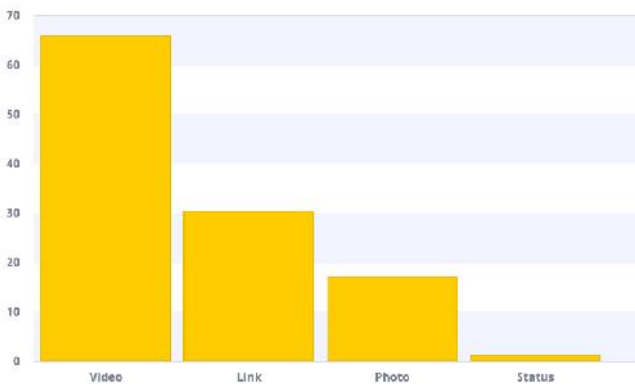

Fig.2 Type of posts on Facebook during the electoral campaign

We believe that videos were so popular during the campaign for their power as visual storytelling; we were able to draw voters' attention and resonate with some viewers much more than with photos or texts, particularly because we tried to use surprising, motivational and emotional messages and even rational messages, but arrayed in humorous or emotional vestments and we showed the human side of candidates.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In this paper we tried to identify several important trends in the digital marketing and particularly in the political marketing, focusing our analysis on the explosive growth of mobile video of the global data traffic and on the impact of videos in an electoral campaign. It also seems clear that the online micro-targeting is becoming a fundamental tool for predictive market segmentation and it reaches now an unprecedented level of sophistication due to social media and the possibility to aggregate huge and detailed amount of data, including through mobile devices. The trend, somehow started in the area of political marketing is gaining more and more ground in the commercial area as well. It seems that the winning edge, for both political teams and commercial brands, will go to those that best masters and manages technology.

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