SOCIAL MEDIA USE IN POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN GREECE

April 2019

A REPORT BY BOURNEMOUTH UNIVERSITY'S CENTRE FOR POLITICS & MEDIA RESEARCH

This report offers a summary analysis of an investigation in the use of social media as a tool of political communication in Greece by drawing on interviews with politicians and communication consultants. It presents key findings regarding the perceptions about and use of social media, patterns of behavior online, the working relationship between politicians and consultants, and the design of digital communication strategies.

CONTENTS

Social media use in political communication in Greece
A REPORT FROM BOURNEMOUTH UNIVERSITY'S CENTRE FOR POLITICS & MEDIA RESEARCH

CONTEXT |ONE

The increasingly important role of social media in elections is more than evident today. Political parties across the globe are learning that along with communicating through traditional media such as television and newspapers, they must invest in digital political communication and campaigning if they want to more effectively reach their electorate and compete with their rival parties. Over the past few years, we've seen an increasingly sophisticated use of social media and other web 2.0 applications from various parties and political candidates especially in the US and countries of the European North (UK, Scandinavian countries). The 2008 and 2012 U.S. presidential campaigns were examples of a creative and extensive use of new technologies such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and Myspace, as well as Ning, Friendfeed, LinkedIn, and Google+. The Barack Obama campaign in 2008 created its own social networking site, MyBO, and the John McCain campaign followed with McCainSpace. Both MyBO and McCainSpace allowed individuals to create their own profiles, interact with others, donate funds, join groups, and arrange events (Veneti, 2014). During the 2016 US elections, Donald Trump invested $150 million dollars in Instagram and Facebook advertisements and employed a full digital team which included 100 staffers ranging from copywriters to web developers and data scientists among other job descriptions.

A limited number of studies on the use of social media by Greek political parties and politicians demonstrates a quite fragmented and instrumental use characterised by limited interactivity, failing as such to exploit Internet's potential. Most of this research was focused on the early use of web pages (2002-2007) and the use of Facebook and Twitter (2008 to the 2014 EU elections) (for more see: Parisopoulos, Tambouris & Tarabanis, 2012; Lappas, Yannas, Triantafillidou, Kleftodimos, 2014; Poulakidakos & Veneti, 2016).

Our research project aims to update current research on the use of social media in Greek politics and identify strengths and weaknesses of the current use that can help politicians, consultants and researchers in the field. This research is important as:
  ➢ None of the current studies has employed interviews and as such they fail to offer the agents' insights (politicians and consultants).
  ➢ In the light of fake news, the rapid spread of misinformation and the subsequent increasingly uncivil nature of public discourse online, politicians need to be able to protect themselves as they have often been the targets of hate speech.

➢ A more sophisticated use of social media can facilitate a more effective communication between Greek politicians and citizens.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES | TWO

- To identify patterns of social media use in political communication in Greece

- To reveal similarities and differences between politicians and consultants with regards to the use of social media in political communication

- To investigate the role of strategy in digital media communication planning

- To compare social media use by politicians in Greece with other EU countries

METHODOLOGY | THREE

Between March-May 2018, we conducted 22 semi-structured interviews with Greek politicians and political communication consultants. Given the elite nature of our participants and the difficulties of access that researchers face, a purposive sampling strategy was initially employed to identify communication consultants with relevant experience in using social media in political campaigns, and current/active high profile politicians, with subsequent interviewees recruited through a snowballing method. We targeted politicians from across the political spectrum, with our sample consisting of 13 high profile politicians from three of the five major political parties in Greece. Five participants were from New Democracy (ND), (a conservative party that was also the opposition party at time of interviews); five from KINAL (Kinima Allagis) (a coalition of socialist and centre-left parties); three from SYRIZA (left wing party, also the governing party at the time of the interviews). Our politician interviewees were of various ages, five were female and eight male, and they included former and current ministers (both junior and senior) and city mayors.

Nine interviews were conducted with political consultants (1 female consultant). Five of our sampled consultants worked in communication consultancy companies (as owners or employees) and have had multiple clients, and four had have been working for specific politicians (communication advisers) at the time we spoke to them.

Interviews were semi-structured with our emphasis on obtaining stories about their professional experiences of campaigning on social media. Given the nature of the senior and powerful group of interviewees, and the crucial balance with institutional research ethics, all names and job titles have been removed.

KEY FINDINGS |FOUR

4.1 Candidates & Consultants: The relationship

KEY DYNAMICS IN THIS RELATIONSHIP ARE:

1. Consultants coaching politicians on appropriate use of social media. This often means curbing their natural tendencies to post the same material across platforms.

2. Tension of range of practices when it comes to managing social media accounts. Sometimes candidates want control over SM use, other times it's left to consultants. Candidates are quite more conservative in their use of social media.

3. Consultants are trying to bring strategy to SM use, where it doesn't exist.

Candidates vary in their abilities and willingness to exploit social media. They strive for an 'authentic' approach, but are often restricted by a range of fears: fear of exposing their family, fear of appearing narcissistic, fear of trolls, and fear of making mistakes (as everything is archived). They recognise that digital platforms help them bypass mainstream media but find creating content time consuming and so feel the pressure of this additional work. Some politicians find technology empowering and liberating, giving them a sense of control of their communication.

> *I also want to avoid having people cutting and framing my words as they wish. Therefore, when using social media I try to avoid anything that can be misunderstood or can easily be distorted*
>
> (politician)

> *I have not understood its function* [referring to Instagram]*! I am a bit concerned with what they have managed to do, to create a community of billions of people using Facebook, and Twitter and all that, and they can monitor them.*
>
> (politician)

> *I think that Facebook, which I manage myself, is a means of expressing myself* [...] *It's an incredible tool!* [...] *your message can be heard by thousands of people as it is. Without having to go through the traditional media or through vested relations that are being developed with those media, for me social media is liberating and very important*
>
> (politician)

Politicians hold a more conservative approach to the use of social media compared to consultants. Drawing on our interview data it is very apparent that the majority of Greek politicians make a very basic use of SMS, not exploiting the full potential of the new technologies. According to a recent survey by the Greek market research company About People (2018), the majority of Greek MPs have a FB account (85,7%), followed by Twitter (69%) and 26,7% have an Instagram account. However these data cannot tell us if the accounts have been active or what kind of activity has taken place. We expect slight differences in these percentages (increasing numbers) in view of the forthcoming elections in Greece in 2019.

Source: About People (April 2018)

> **Who manages the politicians' social media accounts?**
> **We found a mixed approach**
> **Based on various factors such as digital skills of candidates, amount of resources campaign/ candidate has, attitude of politician towards social media.**
> **Budget and resources can differentiate dramatically between MPs, new politicians, party leaders and parties as a whole.**

Consultants see themselves as having the greater knowledge and experience to design both strategy and tactics with politicians, supplying content that can then be tailored for each platform. Maintaining a platform specific rhetoric is important while having a consistent image and constant presence. Although Greek consultants, especially those with specialized knowledge on communication, are aware of the necessity for a fully fledge strategy, working with politicians can be a challenge.

"*Sometimes it is not easy to do this job. We advise them but they also listen to their wives, their friends...*" (consultant)

"*Politicians do not always listen to their communication consultants*" (consultant)

Compared to many European nations Greek politicians were behind in adopting a strategic focus when using digital platforms. While UK MPs were considering the integration of social media into their communication in 2005 (Jackson & Lilleker, 2009), consultants note a five year lag in Greece.

I think it was back in 2012 when this whole thing started, which has now been systematised and turned professional—and then in 2014, with the [electoral] campaign

(consultant)

As obvious from the findings, strategy is not -in many cases- a defining factor in the way that politicians or their consultants design their digital media communication plan. In places, tactics seem to take the lead over strategy.

4.2 Affordances

The affordances social media offer for political communication are also claimed to be better understood by consultants than politicians. "The concept of affordances relates to what various platforms are actually *capable of doing* and *perceptions of what they enable*, along with the *actual practices that emerge as people interact with platforms*" (Kreiss et al., 2018:19).

Research has shown that online structures in virtual campaigning enable individuals to mobilize other potential voters, participate in creating their own campaign material, and recruit users as campaign volunteers (Veneti, 2014). By responding to followers in the social media, a candidate adds a human touch to the campaign and can more easily turn digital followers into real-world volunteers. In the 2016 US elections, Twitter was the key medium for moments during the campaign when there was breaking news and debates or other media events such as conventions and vice presidential picks (Kreiss et al., 2018). With regards to Facebook, as McCain (Marco Rubio campaign, social media director) explains, thanks to its broad reach, Facebook was used for more generalized as well as targeted messages and online advertising designed to identify and persuade new supporters (Kreiss et al., 2018). Sigala (Bernie Sanders campaign, social media director) explained that they utilized Sanders's extensive Reddit following to promote content on Facebook and Twitter (Kreiss et al., 2018).

What the Greek data tells us:

Drawing on our data with Greek politicians and consultants, digital technologies are generally a means for bypassing media gatekeepers and contacting specific audiences directly. As such, usage can be a

liberating experience as politicians can set their own agenda and tone. But consultants were keen to stress that platforms offer different affordances that are not always exploited by politicians.

In general terms, perceptions and uses of social media as follows:

Twitter is a harsher environment but good for broadcasting and reaching influentials. **Facebook** is more social and better for community building. **Youtube** has potential as an archive for videos. **Instagram** offers a 'backstage' view into the private and personal lives and so can be used to build a more 'authentic' persona.

(based on the interview data)

Dialogue is an affordance of social media platforms which some exploit and some are nervous about. Many politicians do not fully exploit the affordances of each platform due to their low skill level, understanding or nervousness of fully embracing more personalised or interactive communication styles.

Recent studies (Kreiss et al, 2018) have demonstrated that increasingly sophisticated use of SM in advanced western democracies includes disaggregating SM from one another. This is not clear in the Greek case. For a number of our politicians, 'social media' was considered as a monolithic entity that they were engaging with, rather than a set of distinct platforms, each with their own distinct affordances that require bespoke strategies.

Many politicians and consultants do not seem to exploit the various affordances of the different digital communication platforms. For example Facebook seems to be extensively used for building awareness but it is not used for electoral mobilization (Cogburn & Espinoza-Vasquez, 2011; Lilleker & Jackson, 2010).

Other social media such as YouTube or Snapchat, among others, are not used at all or they are used by a minority and very scarcely (they do not seem to be part of a strategic communication plan with the sole exception of YouTube in PASOK's 2009 campaign strategy).

Comparison with other EU countries:

The 2014 EU elections marked the beginning of a more systematic use of social media in Greece. Based on data from a comparative study of 16 countries participating in the 2014 EU elections, Greece had one of the lower levels of penetration when comparing the total number users of the Facebook platform with the number who follow a political party . Malta had the highest penetration rate (22% of potential

followers), followed by Hungary (12%) Cyprus and the Czech Republic (10%) then Luxemburg (8%), Sweden and Austria (6%), Denmark, Slovakia, Belgium, Portugal, Greece and Poland (5-4%), with parties from other countries gaining less than 3% of their potential audience, with France (1.6%) and Latvia (.04%).

Average Number of Party Facebook Fans		16651
	Minimum	593
	Maximum	35663
Average Number of Party Twitter Followers		8635
	Minimum	0
	Maximum	18095

Table 1: Followers of political parties in Greece during the 2014 EP election

Parties were however fairly average users overall, with a strong and statistically significantly higher propensity to post pictures, include hyperlinks and produce videos; this demonstrates that overall EU parties were not in 2014 heavy users of social media

Total number of Facebook posts by parties	47
Videos	9
Pictures	16
Text only	4
Hyperlinks	18
Percentage community growth during the election	4.7%
Total number of Tweets by parties	133

Table 2: Use of platforms, and content posted, by Greek political parties during the 2014 EP election campaign

Comparing the activities of party followers, Greek parties[1] had a strong and statistically significant likelihood (Spearman's rho .527***) to attract followers who leave comments only. Research from other

---

[1] Greek parties included are: Ανεξάρτητοι Έλληνες (ANEL); Δημιουργία Ξανά! (DX); Δημοκρατική Αριστερά (DIMAR); Δράση (Drassi); Κομμουνιστικό Κόμμα Ελλάδας (ΚΚΕ); Λαϊκός Ορθόδοξος Συναγερμός (LAOS); Νέα Δημοκρατία (ND); Οικολόγοι Πράσινοι (OP); ΠΑΣΟΚ - Ελιά - Δημοκρατική Παράταξη (PASOK); Συνασπισμός Ριζοσπαστικής Αριστεράς - Ενιαίο Κοινωνικό Μέτωπο (SYRIZA); Το Ποτάμι (Το Potami); Χρυσή Αυγή (ΧΑ)

contexts suggests where there are high numbers of users who comment only, the atmosphere tends to be more combative and hostile, with supporters and opponents arguing with one another on party profiles (see Zurutuza-Muñoz & Lilleker, 2018).

Compared to other EU nations Greek parties enjoyed a reasonable number of followers who only like content (likers), fairly lower number of followers who like and share content (activists), and despite the correlation a lower number of users who comment only (debaters). Greek parties do however have a reasonable high number of Twitter activists which correlates strongly with their activities on Twitter (Spearman's rho .468***). So, Greek parties have a community of followers that are willing to engage, but they need to find the content worth engaging with. Hence developing content that is likeable and shareable is key.

4.3 Audiences

Both politicians and consultants acknowledge that different platforms appeal to different audiences, however consultants are much more aware of the different ways platforms need to be used and of the different digital audiences.

Facebook is perceived as the social medium with the broadest reach. Some consultants mentioned that older people are more attracted to FB than other social media.

Instagram is considered as more of a youth platform and less political.

Twitter addresses a much more politicized audience that includes among others politicians, journalists, and opinion leaders. In that sense Twitter is perceived as having an impact on the news agenda.

Interestingly, it seems that neither politicians nor the consultants consider **YouTube** as an essential communication platform. In the majority of cases, YouTube is merely being used as an archive for videos. On the contrary, studies have shown that YouTube is a tool for persuading the less engaged audience; it "is perceived as the best for reaching populations with lower literacy rates and in newer democracies reflecting that video is more suitable for a less educated and politically literate electorate" (Lilleker et al, 2014: 16).

> **Design interacts with and affects how and whether content reaches audiences, and what those audiences can ultimately do in a digital environment**

> ➢ **Use of analytics**

It seems that in the field of political communication, Greece has the potential to make much more sophisticated use of social media analytics for political campaigning purposes. Analytics are crucial to any political campaigning for profiling, ad placement, and targeted communication.

There is a striking difference between politicians and consultants as far as their understanding of the use of social media analytics is concerned. As apparent from the quotes, most of the politicians who participated in this study, do not know what social media analytics are about and as a result it is impossible to check if their advisors are properly monitoring them.

I do not read the analytics as I have no idea how to use them. The only thing that I check is the number of my followers
(politician)

"*There is a partner, dealing almost exclusively with social media. Yes, they are monitoring them. I don't know exactly what they monitor but I know they do***"**

(politician)

4.4 Personalization

Understanding what politicians are posting and how they are interacting on Twitter are important questions because recent research has shown that certain online campaign strategies and forms of communication (i.e. the use of Twitter's interactive features and personal communication) are effective for attracting and involving citizens (Lee and Oh 2012; Lee and Shin 2012, 2014; Graham, Jackson, and Broersma, 2019).

Experimental research here has shown that interactive and personal communicative strategies can facilitate a sense of (imagined) intimacy and (emotional) closeness. In the Netherlands, for example, Kruikemeier's et al. (2013) found that candidates who combined personalization with higher interactivity triggered the highest levels of perceived closeness (see also Utz 2009). Moreover, such forms of communication may lead to more votes. Research on the 2010 and 2012 Dutch general elections suggest that interactivity and personal communication via Twitter has positive consequences in the voting booth, (potentially) leading to more preferential votes for a candidate (Kruikemeier 2014; Spierings and Jacobs 2014).

Drawing on the interview data, we saw:

- Personalised content, with insights into the private lives of politicians, especially portrayed visually, are highly successful in gaining visibility through likes and shares.

- Family pictures have a particular resonance with voters, although some politicians do not want to expose their families too much. Humanising candidates, and showing personal side/ hinterland were deemed important by consultants.
- Some separation between the personal and political through use of different platforms, a clear separation of functions for example between Instagram (personal) and Twitter (political).

> **However some politicians are less strategic and just use all platforms as a news feed and eschew the more personal or interactive affordances platforms offer.**

4.5 Timing

Importance of timing and coordination of messages across platforms and agents:

In the following example, Christina Reynolds explains the back-end planning that goes into strategic communications work on campaigns (Kreiss et al., 2018). Talking about her early work on the Hillary Clinton campaign in terms of the struggle to coordinate the campaign's various messages across different departments and mediums to achieve consistency, she argues:

"*I worked with our digital team and our policy team and our research team on how do we get things approved, or how do we make sure that everything that goes out is seen by these four departments, because it all matters. We had silly little things…. The policy team could kill me, but we stopped saying "equal pay for equal work." We talked about "equal pay for women." That's a small turn of phrase, but when you've got people pushing that out, the policy team was like, "No, we want to use the same language she's using." Things like that.*"

Our findings from Greece reveal that coordination does not always work well, in some cases as a result of the absence of a clear strategy. Moreover politicians tend to more intensively use their social media accounts during the pre-electoral periods. Many of the practitioners cited that social media platforms took on greater or lesser strategic importance depending on the timing of the electoral cycle.

> **There is nothing worse than a dormant public social media account.**

Quite a lot of politicians talked about setting up accounts for the election campaigns. Timing is important, politicians should maintain a regular pattern of posting and while during an election this can be more intense they should not become invisible once elected.

> **Timing also concerns saliency, matching the message to the audience and context encapsulated in the famous communication dictum of Ethos (the character of the speaker), Pathos (the mood of the audience) and Logos (the fit of speaker, audience and context).**

KEY INSIGHTS |FIVE

➢ Politicians tend to be single platform specialists: Some politicians are very confident users of social media but they usually only focus on one particular platform (e. g. Facebook or Twitter). It is important that they start thinking and adopting a cross-platform strategy.

➢ There is a need to overcome this idea of social media as one thing. Each medium/platform has each own affordances, can be used to reach different audiences and, achieve different goals.

➢ Quite a lot of politicians talked about setting up accounts for the election campaigns. Timing is important, politicians should maintain a regular pattern of posting and while during an election this can be more intense they should not become invisible once elected.

➢ A careful use of interactive and personal communicative strategies can facilitate a sense of (imagined) intimacy and (emotional) closeness that can facilitate communication with the electorate and even attract voters.

➢ While consultants appear to have some understanding of social media analytics, on the whole, this is not shared by politicians. As a result, politicians do not have a clear idea of what 'works' and what doesn't when it comes to their social media strategy.

AUTHORS' BIOS | SIX

Dr. Daniel Jackson

Daniel Jackson is Associate Professor of Media and Communication at Bournemouth University. His research broadly explores the intersections of media, power and democracy, including news coverage of politics, the construction of news, political communication, and the dynamics of civic culture in online environments. He has edited five books and is co-editor of the election analysis reports, published within ten days of major electoral events. Daniel is former convenor of the Political Studies Association's Media and Politics Group and convenor of the Journalism Research Group at Bournemouth University.

Dr. Darren G. Lilleker

Darren G. Lilleker is Associate Professor in Political Communication in The Faculty of Media & Communication, Bournemouth University and is Head of the Corporate and Marketing Communication Academic Department. Dr Lilleker has published widely on the professionalisation and marketisation of political communication and its societal impacts including Political Communication and Cognition (Palgrave, 2014).

Dr. Anastasia Veneti

Anastasia Veneti is Senior Lecturer in Marketing Communications at Bournemouth University. Her research lays in the intersection of media and politics, including political communication, digital political campaigning, media framing, protests and social movements, visual communication. Her work has been published in edited volumes and academic journals. She is the author of *Political Advertising and Citizens' Perceptions* (Nisos, 2009), co-editor (with D. Jackson and D.G. Lilleker) of the *Visual Political Communication* (Palgrave 2019) and co-editor (with Maria Rovisco) of the special issue on Picturing Protest: Visuality, visibility and the public sphere, in *Visual Communication* (2017). She is the convenor of the Centre for Politics and Media Research at Bournemouth University.

REFERENCES | SEVEN

Cogburn, D. L., & Espinoza-Vasquez, F. K. (2011). From networked nominee to networked nation: Examining the impact of Web 2.0 and social media on political participation and civic engagement in the 2008 Obama campaign. *Journal of Political Marketing*, 10, 189–213.

Graham, Jackson, and Broersma, (2019) The Personal in the Political on Twitter: Towards a Typology of Politicians' Personalized Tweeting Behaviours Schwanholz J, Graham T and Stoll PT, eds. *Managing Democracy in the Digital Age: Internet Regulation, Social Media Use, and Online Civic Engagement*. Springer: Berlin

Kreiss, D., Regina G. Lawrence & Shannon C. McGregor (2018) In Their Own Words: Political Practitioner Accounts of Candidates, Audiences, Affordances, Genres, and Timing in Strategic Social Media Use, *Political Communication*, 35:1, 8-31

Kruikemeier S (2014) How political candidates use Twitter and the impact on votes. Computers in Human Behavior 34:131-139. doi:10.1016/j.chb.2014.01.025

Kruikemeier S, Noort GV, Vliegenthart R, Vreese CHD (2013) Getting closer: The effects of personalized and interactive online political communication. European Journal of Communication 28 (1):53-66.

Lappas, G., Yannas, P., Triantafillidou, A., Kleftodimos, A. (2014) Online Political Marketing:
The Use of Facebook in the 2010 Greek Municipal Elections. In Ashu M. G. Solo (Eds) Political Campaigning in the Information Age. USA: IGI Global, pp.110-127.

Lee and Oh 2012 Lee E-J, Oh SY (2012) To personalize or depersonalize? When and how politicians' personalized tweets affect the public's reactions. Journal of Communication 62 (6):932-949

Lee E-J, Shin SY (2012) Are they talking to me? Cognitive and affective effects of interactivity in politicians' twitter communication. Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking 15 (10):515-520.

Lee E-J, Shin SY (2014) When the medium is the message: How transportability moderates the effects of politicians Twitter communication. Communication Research 41 (8):1088-1110.

Lilleker, D., & Jackson, N. (2011). *Political campaigning, elections and the internet: Comparing the US, UK, France and Germany*. London: Routledge.

Parisopoulos, K., Tambouris, E., Tarabanis, K. (2012) Facebook and Greek elections: New fad or real transformation? IEEE TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIETY MAGAZINE doi *10.1109/MTS.2012.2216705*

Poulakidakos S, Veneti A (2016) Political Communication and Twitter in Greece: Jumps on the bandwagon or an enhancement of the political dialogue?. In T Deželan and I Vobic (Eds) *(R)evolutionizing Political Communication through Social Media*. USA: IGI Global, pp. 119-146.

Spierings N, Jacobs K (2014) Getting personal? The impact of social media on preferential voting. Political Behavior 36 (1):215-234.

Utz S (2009) The (potential) benefits of campaigning via Social Network Sites. Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication 14 (2):221-243.

Veneti A (2014) Virtual Campaigns. In K Harvey & Golson, J. Geoffrey (Eds) *Encyclopedia of Social Media and Politics*. London: Sage, pp. 214-218.

Zurutuza-Muñoz, C., & Lilleker, D. (2018). Writing graffiti on the Facebook wall: Understanding the online discourse of citizens to politicians during the 2016 Spanish election. Comunicación y Sociedad, 31(3), 27-43.