

Online Political Communication. How to Use the Web to Build Consensus and Boost Participation – Gianluca Giansante (2015)

Cham/ Heidelberg/ New York/ Dordrecht/ London: Springer, 188 pages.

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For almost a decade now, social media has entered people's lives and has changed political systems all over the world. One can still remember Obama's presidential campaign in 2008 or the impact of Facebook messages during the Egyptian revolution of 2011 or, more recently, the active online campaign for the election of the Romanian President in 2014. Campaigns are constantly changing and are taking advantage of the latest innovations of online communication. Yet, it is the people who carry the message of change and their voice needs to be heard. Online communication is about people who get involved in a special relationship in order to get other people act.

Giansante's latest book is a special type of textbook since it focuses on *how* to use the Internet effectively in order to create, develop and strengthen political consensus. The book is organized into 4 large chapters, special attention being given to online communication tools in order to identify the most effective tools for different situations: how to build a website for a political candidate, how to avoid possible pitfalls, how to use Facebook, Twitter and YouTube in order to create a trust-worthy image and boost participation during elections, how to get people support a cause and, most importantly, how to move active participation from an online environment into an offline environment, the one where change really matters since it affects millions of citizens.

In the chapter entitled *How politics change on the web*, the main aim of the author is to answer the question "How can one best use digital media?" since there is an enormous amount of data on the Internet, but only a small part of it really draws attention and is successful in creating awareness, boosting participation or even raising money. Although a type of mass media, online media has a different logic from traditional media since comments "survive" long after a campaign has ended and may be brought to light in the next campaign. What is more, negative comments on the Internet may be turned into positive comments if one knows how to make effective use of available online tools.

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More than 60 years have passed since the Eisenhower movement in the USA which culminated in the election of the Republican candidate, a fierce opponent of communism. It is worth remembering that this was one of the first successful political campaigns in the 20th century that dwelt on a slogan (*I like Ike*) and later led to the creation of political brands. Nowadays, political candidates need to “sell themselves” and make people adhere to their points of view so that a vote is cast, and to this end they use all strategies available – online and offline. Time has passed and the need to print materials on paper and deliver them is no longer important to make your message heard:

an organization or activist can learn about a piece of legislation in the morning, get fact sheets and statements online by noon, generate thousands of emails to Congress by happy hour and spark bloggers and journalists to write about it all along the way. (Delany 2011 quoted in Giansante 2015, 6)

The new type of networked media and the proliferation of social media have led to the appearance of new forms of large-scale collective actions (p. 6), where costs of producing and disseminating political messages have been cut and new areas for action have been opened.

Giansante starts from the observation that most politicians go online either for a website, a blog or a Facebook profile because it is fashionable; this gives politicians an image of modernity and dynamism (p. 7). Yet, almost all politicians do not use online tools neither to build a relationship of trust with voters nor to encourage participation in elections, two of the major goals of being online. Since politicians have been regarded lately as “inhabiting different worlds”, speaking “incomprehensible languages” and failing to respect the citizens (Coleman and Blumler 2009), the main idea of online political branding is to increase visibility of political programs, to encourage participation, and to build consensus. In other words, a technological tool – the Internet – can and should be used to move people, to make citizens rediscover what they have always had: the desire “to participate and interact, not to be merely passive observers but to be actively involved” (p. 10). Most politicians actually use the web as a unidirectional way of communication, and they do not promote exchange of ideas, dialogue and active listening, although Web 2.0 provides options for interaction. Politicians thus fail to understand that the dynamics of the web has changed, it can and should be used as a positive tool for their programs and human attention is actually missing from the way of doing politics. Giansante turns into a supporter of the return to some of the basic needs of people: to be listened, to be treated as intelligent beings who can be stimulated intellectually and whose voice is heard. Thus, the most important rule for good online communication is based on a change in perspective, i.e. to take *the other* into account, not to focus on yourself.

Since the web is open to everything and everyone, one should take great caution when posting comments and replies to comments as they have a longer life than in traditional print media. What is more, one should be as authentic as possible since this has proved to be greatly valued just as it happens in everyday talk-in-interaction.

Chapter 3, *Building an online communication strategy*, takes the reader to a journey through the objectives and phases of an online political campaign, emphasizing from the very beginning that it is not the tools that should be the primary focus of the campaign, but its objectives. Although each campaign is different, Giansante puts forward three key objectives he considers to be common to the political effort: to spread the campaign's political message, to stimulate and organize participation, and to raise funds. Each objective is thoroughly presented and case studies are provided, the reader being thus provided with real data. The author uses plain language and highlights the most important things to be remembered when taking action in the online environment: *monitor* how much is written on the web, *explain* errors when they appear, and *respond* to comments.

Another important issue that is discussed throughout this chapter is active listening. There are many positive aspects one may get from active listening on web conversations although, at first sight, web does not appear to have been created for two-way communication. Thus, a politician may get ideas on issues of particular interest to the electoral base, may identify weak points, controversial statements or actions or may even help see more clearly how consensus could be better built.

Citizens no longer seem to be interested in politics, mainly because their voice is not heard. This further leads to a decrease in participation to political activities and even to the voting process. The main idea of good and effective online political communication is that – once action has been taken inside the web – it should be transferred to the outside world, i.e. get people out to vote. In other words, the web must be humanized, i.e. it is people who are re-engaged in the political process that will take the action outside the web, thus reinforcing rapport and mobilizing volunteers. In section 3.5.4., Giansante fully covers the successful story of Hollande campaign in France, when a significant increase in votes was recorded during the Election Day.

Chapter 4 is dedicated to the description of the main online communication tools, presenting advantages and disadvantages of using one, another or a combination of tools during a political campaign. Whether it is a website, social media such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Pinterest etc., e-mail lists, online political advertising, search engine marketing or web analytics, the campaign should be mastered professionally from a *central communication hub*. When it comes to creating a web page, Giansante emphasizes that the way to success for a politician is that he/ she should rather *involve* than publish, *share* rather than just say, *mobilize* rather than stay aside. Research carried out in the past years (Nielsen 2011) has shown that people tend to spend 10 to 20 seconds on a web page, on average. If the content is not immediately visible, people will leave the page. Thus, each web page

should be created with the end user in mind, should be simple and easily accessible, i.e. user friendly.

When it comes to social media, one should think of these as dialogic action games (Weigand, 2010): being online requires interaction and silence is negatively valued. In this chapter, Giansante also covers topics such as fake profiles (that promote one's own candidate) and web infiltration (publishing positive comments on a candidate's Facebook page), as well as information security in online communication.

Since the end consumer can avoid promotional material both from the traditional way (by discarding fliers, for example) and from online advertising (using specialized pop-up blockers), advertising has become less effective in political communication. Yet, there are new options for advertisers (e.g., pay-per-click) that led to the appearance of targeted campaigns and a larger number of followers could be recorded. If one bears in mind that the main goal of online communication is not *to persuade* but *to mobilize*, then this is achieved by microtargeting, i.e. a careful analysis of the data according to the segmentation of the audience (p. 120).

In the final chapter of the book, *Producing content that creates participation and consensus*, the author discusses how to develop and publish content that people will want to share, as well as writing for the web, use of images, infographics, and video to promote participation. Throughout the chapter, Giansante tries to answer the following question: *How does one produce content that stimulates interaction?* In order to answer well, first of all, the content must be interesting to those who read it, i.e. it must be targeted and written with the end user in mind, just as it happens with a web page: "The best content spreads information, answers questions, meets needs, helps resolve problems, and even enriches souls" (p. 141). Once it has got people's attention, the message must also be understandable and needs to be accepted as true. Various studies in the field of neuroscience have shown that people need to be involved emotionally in order to be persuaded. In other words, both emotive and cognitive elements should be combined for a maximum effect.

One of the most productive ways of including emotional elements is *to tell a story*. Giansante starts from the premise that people remember stories better and dwells upon this idea, bringing to front a number of ways to use storytelling in political discourse. Apart from the story, there needs to be an editorial plan that answers various questions: Why are you producing the content? Who is your audience? Who are you? What do you want to accomplish with the content? When and how will you develop content? Where will you publish the content? (p. 147). By giving possible answers to these questions, the reader will provide himself/ herself with a lot of information that needs to be covered before the actual campaign. Yet, the fresh, intuitive and involving style of the book will make one provide such answers and actually want to work for a change for the better in the offline world.

Another aspect that is covered in this chapter is writing for the web, since reading online is very different from reading printed text. Giansante is again at his best by providing clear pieces of advice of do's and don'ts for online writing: begin each paragraph with the key concept in bold type [...] use language that is clean and clear [...] use simple language, avoid excessively technical or bureaucratic jargon, and directly address citizens (p. 150). When it comes to discussing the power of images, the author considers that the focus should be on images where politicians actually listen, not talk, since this is what citizens actually want: to be listened and to be convinced that their opinion matters. What is more, web content has become more visual than ever and profiles with videos that prompt interaction get three times more interaction in the form of views, comments or shares than exclusively textual content (p. 167-170).

Giansante's book stands out by clarity and rigorous organization of information. The case studies, together with all the pieces of advice that are spread all over the book, offer valuable insights into the lifecycle of a political campaign. The book not only emphasizes the importance of having a well-established agenda beforehand, but it also convincingly demonstrates that combining online tools may lead to efficient online political campaigns. This book is valuable for discourse analysts, from a more general theoretical perspective, as well as for practitioners in the field of communication and practicing politicians, from a more practical point of view.

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Acknowledgement

This work was supported by a grant of the Romanian National Authority for Scientific Research and Innovation, CNCS - UEFISCDI, project number PN-II-RU-TE-2014-4-0056.