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Building And Managing Political Consensus Through The Internet: A Projectual Model

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the digital applications in political communication and for building consensus, assuming that we need to overcome the idea of the Internet as a simple means of mass communication, and instead analyse it as a social medium for acquiring, activating, and involving people in a specific political idea or movement. The social developments under way in Internet networks are leading to an integration between reality and virtual reality, thus making the Internet an increasingly faithful representation of the real world and of different subjects' social networks. This makes Internet a great opportunity for building consensus.

On the base of these considerations, we are going to elaborate a model for political communication on the Internet, which is integrated in the political marketing flow and articulated in three phases: acquisition, activation and defense. This model is based on the significant case study of Barack Obama and on the innovative approach in using website by Ségolène Royal.

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Keywords

Political marketing, Web 2.0, internet marketing, political communication, online social network, blog.

Introduction

As a political instrument, the Internet is mainly dealt with from two main points of view. On the one hand we focus on the opportunities offered by the Internet to encourage political participation and improve how democratic systems function (e.g. see the recent analysis of Coleman and Blumler, 2009; Lazer and Mayer-Schonberger, 2007; Sunstein, 2009 and Bennet and Wells, 2009). On the other hand, the Internet is considered a means of mass communication, potentially useful to politicians in sustaining TV, radio and newspapers to influence voting behavior during electoral campaigns. There have been various experiences in using the Internet in such a manner, but we are still at an initial stage, "halfway between an informative approach, in which political actors publish on the web contents similar to those broadcast by other media, and a more participatory approach, which acknowledges the crucial role of the dialogic and bidirectional aspects of technology, not only to achieve objectives such as openness and democratization, but also to improve the organizational efficiency and mobilize additional resources compared to those normally available through traditional means" (Vaccari, 2009, p.47).

From these considerations surfaces we notice the absence of a planning model for building consensus through the Internet, capable of both turning the use of the Internet into a systematic means of attracting new supporters and

of providing these new supporters with the operative and organizational tools needed to for them to take tangible action during the consensus-development operations.

This paper focuses on how Internet tools can be used to build political consensus. In this context, we present a conceptual and operational management model for political communication which exploits the potential of the Internet environment, which assumes that the Internet cannot be considered a mere means of mass communication, but is to be used as both a medium to acquire and activate the available resources during the electoral campaign and as a means of defense against reputation-based attacks. Building a model can represent a step forward in engaging the Internet to build consensus, as it helps identify the stages of campaign management, the most appropriate tools for each stage and to place Internet-based political communication in the comprehensive political marketing process.

For this purpose, our paper analyses the evolution of the Internet tool, compared to the traditional media, focusing on relational dynamics in online social networks and on their relations with offline social networks. Hereafter, we will examine how marketing logics are applied to politics and we will define how Internet communication is positioned within the political marketing process. Finally, based on the significant experiences of Barack Obama and Ségolène Royal (as far as innovative approach in using websites is concerned) we will build the planning model for managing political communication via the Internet, dividing it into the three phases of acquisition, activation and defense.

The Internet evolution

The first step in understanding how the Internet impacts on political marketing is to identify the current characteristics of this instrument, comparing them with those of other media which traditionally host political communication initiatives. In its initial phase, the Internet converged on the same medium written, audio and visual contents, equipping them with persistence, searchability and replicability (Boyd, 2007). At this stage the Internet revolution was mainly linked to the possibility of finding information, but not to producing information: there still was a technical, economical and skill-related barrier between those who produced content and those who read it. Now, however, we have entered a new situation (the so-called "Web 2.0"), in which there is no distinction between those who produce content and those who make use of it: nowadays a constantly increasing amount of users uncover the opportunities offered by the creation and diffusion of contents on the net (O'Reilly, 2005).

However, this element does not suffice to validly explain the phenomenon.

Nowadays, as we mentioned before, the possibility of communicating to an indistinct audience is no longer restricted to a professional élite. Those who write on the web are not professionals and, if on the one hand this has created many doubts on the reliability of information itself (e.g. Sunstein 2009), and even on the future of culture (e.g. Keen 2007), on the other it has also fuelled another interesting consequence: social networks go online. They go online because they discover the web as a revolutionary tool for sharing content within their network of acquaintances and friends, an online acquaintance network, which in perspective tends to be equal to or larger than the network of physical acquaintances. This way the chatter of citizens meeting, confronting and expressing themselves online causes a permanent noise which, undeniably, represents a potential influential factor for political

choices. Furthermore this repeatable and searchable noise helps modify the way potential voters receive information on candidates running for election. The Internet is capable of speeding up and dilating over time the consequences of a possible denigratory process, which makes monitoring and controlling information a critical issue for the politician, especially considering the voters' ever increasing use of multiple sources of information and critical attitude (Benkler, 2006; Bennet, 2008 on the impact of new media in the civic involvement of young people).

These macro-changes define a social dimension of the Net. Society goes online and the Internet hosts and mirrors the connections and nodes of the social network. This is the profound meaning of the ongoing technological and social change, a transformation that cannot be underestimated by any political actor. In this scenario it would be simplistic to consider the Internet a mere means of communication, instead we need to focus on its mobilization, organization and participation potential (Vaccari, 2006).

If it is increasingly senseless to consider "real" and "virtual" as two separate worlds, then online communication cannot concern exclusively the virtual world, but should also consider the "real" activities of political life and electoral campaigns.

Supporters of a political party can find in the Internet the operative and organizational tools necessary to involve them in consensus-developing activities aimed at the members of their social network. In other words, the Internet allows to reach influential voters, creating effective decentralized and flexible political participation activities, essential to "the new competitive scenario of political communication" defined "Third Age" (Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999) and typified by "postmodern" electoral campaigns (Norris, 2000; Vaccari, 2004).

In order to understand the ways and means of involvement, it is essential for us to know grouping dynamics and the relations between groups. The above-

mentioned transformations are highlighting a process that has been ongoing for some time: the birth of a society made of a network of micro-groups (Desjeux, 1996 and Cova, 2003). Each individual may belong to several groups, to which he participates more emotionally than rationally, more to "be" than to "act". To better understand this idea, let's consider what it means to join a group on Facebook; this represents the most explicative example of this concept. A society which is increasingly formed of weak ties and weak adhesions (Granovetter, 1973). From this point of view, the Internet and all Web 2.0 tools (online social networking, blogging, sharing videos and photos, tweets, etc.) do nothing but facilitate the search for these micro-groups, the adhesion to these groups, and the exchange of information and memberships. Ties remain extremely weak, but through them information does flow, more easily than in the past, or more easily than outside the Net. If, on the one hand, strong knots are considered the main carriers of information and reputation for this information (the "mavens" in Gladwell's terminology, 2002), on the other hand the weak knots are a sort of bridge which allows communication between different groups.

How to estimate then the value of an individual's network? The starting point of course lies in the analysis of this social network. In social studies, the *Social Network Analysis* has been, for some time, used as theoretical and methodological tool in researching many phenomena and processes. The approach that characterizes the *Social Network Analysis* has its roots in the network theories: the concept of "six degrees of separation" (Milgram, 1967), the aforementioned Granovetter Theory (1973). The theories of Silverman (2001), McConnell and Huba (2002), Gladwell (2002) and Godin (2005), which analyze from different perspectives the roles in disseminating messages within social networks, are based on the belief that we can identify the roles of information transmission and of support to credibility, common to different social groups. Today the *Social Network Analysis* turns to precise scientific methods and principles, and in some cases uses sophisticated

mathematical analysis and statistics expertise and tools (eg. Corbisiero, 2007, and Carrington, Scott, Wasserman, 2005). The use of these tools allows the politician to understand the potential of the supporter's network, and provide the supporter with operational and organizational tools to fully exploit it, through activities of political communication over the Internet.

Political communication through the Internet in the process of political marketing

Beginning from the above-mentioned reconstruction of the Internet evolution, we can define a consensus-building through the Internet. This does not mean identifying a single modus operandi for all situations, regardless of social context and elements unique to each scenario. In fact, the comparative literature on political communication (Plasser and Plasser, 2002) emphasizes that a process of hybridization of election campaigns is in progress, and that innovations may be used only to the extent in which they can be adapted to the local, social, political and cultural conditions.

Before presenting the model for planning and managing political communication through the Internet, we must study the political applications of marketing logics and define where to place the Internet communication within the political/electoral strategic marketing process.
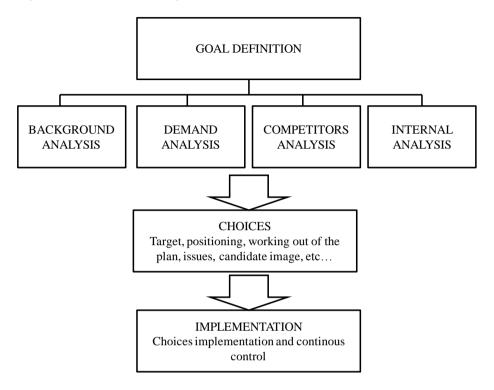
Norris (2000), in his analysis of the processes of electoral campaign evolution, emphasizes that the current advertising campaign (called "postmodern") is typified by the professionalism of all processes of communication planning, which can be considered from a marketing perspective.

The application of marketing logics to politics is divided into three main categories (Mazzoleni, 2004):

1. Political marketing: the communication activity implemented during a legislature period, to strengthen positions (by those who govern) or to modify the political equilibrium (by the opposition).

2. Electoral marketing: the activity of building political consensus and gaining votes during electoral campaigns.

3. Social marketing: the activity aimed at making the public opinion aware of certain issues of social interest.

In this context the idea of permanent electoral campaign, suggested by Blumenthal (1982), justifies the fact that research focuses on electoral marketing, since, if all political action is marked by an electoral nature, then understanding how to build consensus during election means in fact acquiring the necessary tools during the term of legislature. By integrating the analysis of Cattaneo and Zanetti (2003) and Marek's recovery from Mazzoleni, you can draw a model of political marketing.

Figure 1: Political marketing model

GOAL DEFINITION

BACKGROUND ANALYSIS — **DEMAND ANALYSIS** — **COMPETITORS ANALYSIS** — **INTERNAL ANALYSIS**

CHOICES
Target, positioning, working out of the plan, issues, candidate image, etc…

IMPLEMENTATION
Choices implementation and continous control

Source: Adaption from Marek (2001, p.56) mentioned in Mazzoleni (2004)

The objectives a potential candidate can aim at are (Mazzoleni, 2004, p.150): notoriety campaign and electoral campaign. The first intends to increase the fame and visibility of the candidate; the second objective consists in gaining the largest number of votes during the election. Once the objective has been identified, the process of analysis can begin, articulated in:

- Analysis of the background or external environment: demographics, economic conditions, institutional and socio-cultural aspects.

- Analysis of the demand: analysis of the physical, political and category constituency, as defined by Cattaneo and Zanetti (2003).

- Analysis of the competitive system: analysis of competitors (as in Cattaneo and Zanetti, 2003, p.123, the competitor's constituency).

- Internal analysis of the candidate or political party (using the Swot Analysis: see Hill and Westbrook, 1997).

Based on these analyses, we can then make choices, in terms of targeting, positioning, issues and political arguments, candidate image, etc...

In particular, at this stage, "the political product (ideas, issues, candidate image) must somehow be targeted, to effectively meet the peculiarities of the different segments of voters" (Cattaneo and Zanetti, 2003, p .133). In other words, we choose the target markets by defining the most appropriate strategic option (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Strategic options in the choice of target markets

	Physical constituency	*Political constituency*	*Category constituency*	*Media constituency*
Mass marketing	All voters	All decision - makers within the party with a single message	All categories (single message and single strategy)	All media
Segmented Marketing	More than one segment of voters (messages tailored to each segment)	Two or three major decision - makers of party	Categories consistent with own positioning	One or more media (e.g. radio and press but no TV; local media but no national media)
Niche Marketing	One segment of voters	One decision -maker within the party	One category	One media
Custom Marketing	Customized message for each voter	All decision-makers within the party with a personalized message	All categories with customized messages and strategies	Message customized to selected media

Source: Cattaneo-Zanetto (2003, p.133)

Finally the implementation phase consists in achieving the previously defined choices.

Building consensus through the Internet: a conceptual and operative model

Having defined the political marketing model, we can then place within it, in the appropriate stages, the Internet-based activity for building consensus

The approach we present moves from the identification of the links and the contact moments that potential voters (whether individuals, groups or corporations) can have with the candidate or political structure. This activity falls under the analysis phase.

Once we have identified the places and the moments of contact, we must understand the technology and tools needed to manage the relationship between the candidate and voters. Later, during the choosing phase, we can operate in three different moments: acquiring, activating or involving, and defending.

- The acquisition consists in identifying in which web areas we can find our target groups of voters and, after that, in making contact with them. In this way, through the acquisition, we can increase the database which is the starting point of the work.

- The activation process consists in generating voluntary involvement, by mobilizing the voter through a sense of belonging. The involvement starts from creating different web areas each meant for a specific target group, designed to involve voters, sympathizers and supporters, providing them with the tools for action. The goal is voter commitment.

- The defense is represented, in this context, by the Internet monitoring activity that the candidate must develop in order to analyze or confute the opinions regarding political issues.

During the process of acquiring contacts, a social network analysis is essential. This analysis can be carried out using two different tactics: widespread seeding and localized seeding.

The first one typically meets the objective of creating buzz and noise about the issue. In other words this means giving the issue the maximum possible exposure, to reach a critical mass which then starts to stimulate the diffusion within the group and between groups. The first objective of the "widespread seeding" tactic is to achieve what Gladwell (2000) calls the Tipping Point.

The widespread seeding strategy has high initial costs, for the purchase of advertising spaces or sending messages, aimed at creating buzz in all possible groups, in the hope of becoming self-sustained.

The second tactic, localized seeding, is more evolved. It provides a preliminary analysis of the social networks in which to spread the contents, to identify those who are more involved, and who will probably send the content to people belonging to their own social net, exploiting both weak ties (proceeding then to other groups) and strong ties (typically within a same group).

This second tactic allows us to:

- Increase the numbers of passages from user to user of the membership message, to reach those users whose link to the candidate is less direct;

- Defer the involvement of mass media, which are usually involved because of their interest in any relevant phenomenon and not because they get paid for advertising space.

Morevoer, the users who have joined thanks to the localized seeding tactic are more likely to get involved and to play an important role in the second phase of the project.

The activation process also cannot disregard a prior identification of individuals' profiles. In fact, starting from the Mc Connel and Huba (2002) classification, we can identify different degrees of involvement with a party, a candidate, a political idea:

- Agreement: the individual agrees with the candidate but does not share his opinion with his social network;

- Word of mouth: the individual talks to others about the candidate, his ideas and policy within the normal communication flows, and does this in a spontaneous manner, not being exploitable for the candidate's success. He doesn't feel like a bearer of any political entity's ideas: his ideas, at a certain time, are simply consistent with those of the candidate. He is a well-disposed person but difficult to involve;

- Evangelization: the individual bears the candidate's or political party's message with the intention of influencing the voting behavior of his social network's members, but does not believe this action could actually favor a political party;

- Membership: not only does the individual diffuse bears the candidate's or political party's message with the will to influence influencing the voting behavior of his social network's members, but he feels (or wants to feel) he is sharing in the candidate's success. He is convinced (or is willing to be convinced) that his action, together with that of others, can actually support the candidate's political campaign.

The defense phase begins with monitoring the buzz online, focusing on the users' opinions regarding the candidate or political party, and on understanding opinions and positions on issues relevant to building the consensus. The measuring systems for the online buzz mainly address four macro-phases:

1. Capturing information: this is achievable through software systems that capture opinions based on semantic associations and through teams of experts who select the information considered strategically interesting for the candidate or party;

2. Combining the information with variables strategic to the candidate and the search for information regarding those who have expressed it, to understand the conformation of their social network and the role they play in it;

3. Elaborating statistics on a macro level to represent the situation of the opinion on the candidate, and to build hypotheses for future trends;

4. Identifying the websites containing the opinions that are more interesting for the candidate and most influential to voters, in order to identify where to continue monitoring and where to intervene should it be necessary to operate a reputation defense.

The defense phase then continues with the classification of the candidate's opposers, according to the following variables: managerial ability, knowledge of the candidate's program and of the expanse and recognition of the social network. Based on the combination of these variables, we can define two boundary classifications:

• Good managerial skills, poor knowledge of the candidate's program, of the expanse and recognition within one's own network;

- Poor managerial skills, good knowledge of the candidate's program and of the expanse and recognition within one's own network.

The third part of the defense phase consists in actual defensive actions and in managing reputation attacks. For this purpose, in order to understand how the reputation of a politician is structured, one should refer to Thompson's crucial analysis (2000). Political reputation has some peculiar characteristics: it is generally accumulated over a long period of time, but can be dissipated in a short period of time due to an abuse, because being based on the respect of others, it is a questionable resource. Moreover, once reputation is lost, it is difficult to recover. In particular, Thompson differentiates skill-specific reputation and character reputation: the first is the specific ability in a particular activity (generally for a politician it is the ability to govern), and the other concerns personal integrity, the fact of being a trustworthy, morally virtuous person. Political scandals tend to affect mainly this second type of reputation, which, being a primary source of symbolic power, is crucial for the politician.

Tools

Internet provides several communication tools, most of which undoubtedly have various elements of interest for political purposes. In this section we will analyze which targets to bind to each tool in every phase of the consensus-building project. The analysis is supplemented with material from two real-life study cases:

- Barack Obama's electoral campaign. This is probably one of the most famous campaigns in the history of politics, which made ample and strongly-planned use of Internet tools to build political consensus, backed by a very strong and well-constructed "brand".

- Ségolène Royal's electoral campaign for the Socialist Party's Primary Elections, and later for the French Presidential Elections of 2007. This activity is especially interesting for its logic in using the Internet as a tool for participation and activation. For the purpose of this paper it is significant for its general setup, rather than for the use of Internet tools. Therefore, the Ségolène Royal case will be placed under the Blog / Website tool, as it is a significant case study on using websites as a tool to generate the activation of electors.

The integrated use of the tools is summarized in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Internet tools used in the three phase of the project for building political consensus

TOOLS	Acquisition	Activation	Defense
BLOG/ WEB SITE	- Presenting political ideas - Integrating with Facebook Connect as a first step towards acquisition	- Platform for providing the tools to promote the candidate, to the subjects to activate	- Posts to defend against accusations and reputation attacks - Managing comments
SOCIAL NETWORK	- Social network analysis - Advertising - Opening a page on Facebook and status updates integrated with micro-blogging	- Event management - Group involvement - Incentivating the birth of local support groups	- Analyzing the opposers' social networks - Searching for the opponents' ideas
MICRO-BLOGGING	- Transparency: daily political activities observed via micro-posts	- Use by the activated subject to update the candidate and feel near to him	
WEB SEARCH ENGINE	- Keyword Advertising: purchase of keywords on relevant issues		- Searching on search engines to understand sources of threat - Purchasing relevant keywords to opposers' reduce visibility
PHOTO AND VIDEO SHARING		- Videos available for sharing share between the activated members	
E-MAIL MARKETING E MOBILE MARKETING	- Acquiring databases to which to send the candidates' programmatic ideas and invitations to subscribe	- Targeting the subjects to involve - Call for involvement	- Use of email and text messaging systems to provide the team of supporters with the tools to refute negative news and clarify the position

Source: Our elaboration

Blog/ web site

In literature regarding the use of Internet tools for political marketing, the quantitative analysis of website characteristics is a well-established method (see Bentivegna, 2006; Farmer and Fender, 2005). These reviews are based on grids, in which the variables of site-evaluation are usually divided into information tools, participation instruments and site professionalism (Vaccari, 2007). Based on these grids we can verify the characteristics of the politician's website and we can assign a "score" that measures the informative ability, the force in generating participation and the professionalism of the website.

Our analysis focuses on information tools, mainly (but not exclusively) regarding the acquisition, and on participation tools, related to the activation. This analysis does not have quantitative characteristics, nor does it aspire to give scores, but is useful in supporting the model previously defined, by identifying how the blog / web site may be used in the processes of acquisition, activation and defense, in terms of both technological tools present and contents.

The blog/web site of the candidate, within the consensus-building strategy, is where you can find the genetic codes of ideas to disseminate and share with potential voters.

By "genetic code" we mean all the practical tools necessary to carry the message and the consensus from one point to another of the network. The website should be designed to serve as meeting point for the overall resources needed to encourage the users to become active supporters of the campaign. Everything should aim at giving the citizen the feeling of not needing a professional organizer, but to feel confident in operating by himself

in the process of diffusion. This means exploiting the potential, identified by Bimber (2003), of the new media to create "post-bureaucratic" kinds of organization, where organizational efficiency coincides with a greater operational autonomy of individuals.

During the acquisition phase it is essential we minimize the barriers separating the user from the first step towards involvement in the campaign (membership). In parallel, however, we need to collect information about the user who is expressing interest in the candidate. Facebook Connect is a powerful instrument, perceived as less intrusive than a normal registration, which allows users to login to a website with their personal Facebook credentials without giving the website operator any personal data. To avoid missing an opportunity for contact, it is possible to request the email address in a second step of the activation, when the user is already motivated, or request the possibility of sending emails through the popular online social network.

Barack Obama built web areas which had been previously studied based on the targets and the involvement logics. Obama's web site, due to the variety of tools and the wealth of information available, is directed at an audience who is accustomed to using the Internet, who spends a lot of time online. It is primarily directed towards those who, through the Internet, can be acquired and then involved.

If we relate Obama's real-life case to the consensus-building moments defined above, we can classify the different instruments used in each phase of the campaign, referring in particular to the phases of acquisition and activation. The acquisition phase used several web areas, well-constructed in a basic site (my.barackobama.com), to which various websites were linked, divided by States (useful to approach potential voters using local issues), language (to encourage a segmentation based on communities and cultures) and by political topic (health, employment and economy, etc.)

Furthermore, in an extremely innovative way, a community integrated with various websites was created, built to generate involvement.

Before entering in detail the issue of the conception of the community itself, we need to underline how, during its construction, barriers that might discourage the active subject from involving other subjects with whom he is or potentially could enter in relation to guide their voting behavior were identified first.

Once these barriers were identified, the tools to eliminate them were identified. Such barriers and tools identified by their fall are summarized in the following table (figure 4):

Figure 4: Relation between barriers to involvement and tools to eliminate barriers

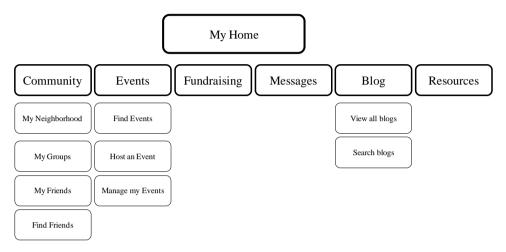| Barrier to the involvement of other subjects	Tools in the web community
Motivational barrier: inertia and lack of motivation	Activity Index, Dashboard Check
Geographical barrier: difficulty in identifying individuals to involve and with whom to aggregate around the "Obama idea"	ZIP Code Search, Local Group Search
Organizational barrier: difficulty in organizing involvement activities (phone calls, events, letters, etc.)	My Network, My Group, Resources

Source: Our elaboration

Figure 5: Acquisition and activation tools in the my.barackobama.com community

Acquisition	*Activation*
Building web areas based on the target, language, geographical area and political issues	MY.BARACKOBAMA reserved area
	Dashboard control with system which measures the degree of activity (index degree)
Facebook Connect system to facilitate access using the same credentials as the Facebook personal account	Neighborhood system based on the zip code (useful to consolidate the network on the territory: local groups, local people and local events)
	Competition system by displaying other supporters' activity index
	My Network: a system to activate friends and receive requests from potential friends
	My Groups and Find Groups: a system to create, show and search groups by categories, recent posts, date of creation, most updated, name

Source: Our elaboration

The structure and functionality of the web site are summed up as following:

Figure 6: Navigation system and functionality of the reserved area of the site

my.barackobama.com

Source: Our elaboration of data from my.barackobama.com

The homepage shows a dashboard, a control panel which summarizes the different community areas and measures the level of involvement using a synthetic indicator (activity index). This public indicator was created to measure the activity or the commitment of the activist and to put him in competition with others.

The community itself was mainly structured in three "macro-categories": the people, the groups and the events. The most important secondary areas were: My Neighborhood, My Groups, My Friends, FindFriend, mu friends or mu network. These areas had the following functions:

- **My Neighborhood**: After entering the zip code, local groups and persons could connect and local active events were presented. People could be contacted and invited to events directly through the platform.
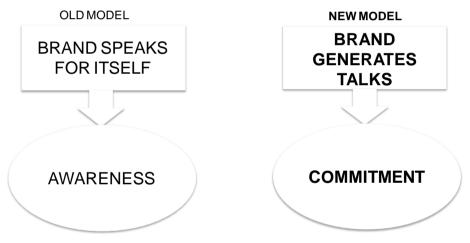
- **My Groups**: allowed campaign supporters to view their own groups (those created recently, those recently updated, those with more activists, those closer to the supporter and those with recent posts) to search for a member, to find a group, to create a group.

- **My Friends and Find Friends**: allowed you to view updated and recently- created profiles, those close to the activist and those within the groups joined by the activist.

- **The "Events"** macro-area allowed users to search, organize and manage a local event.

- **The "Fund Raising"** area was intended to provide the activist with the methodology and tools to collect funds. A particular page contained a visible thermometer indicating the goal set by the supporter, while the control page allowed users to view the level of the achieved target by synchronizing with their own agenda and with a system to invite new people to donate to Obama's cause.

- **The "Messages"** area allowed users to manage e-mail service within the system.

- **The "Blog" area** allowed users to visit the activist blog and create their own blog.

Finally, from within the community the user could access the "Resources" area, which provided guidelines and tools for managing events, making phone calls, and arranging a neighborhood event on specific political issues. The organization of the training system was structured in four points: getting started, before, during and after the organization.

A key element in the involvement strategy carried out by Obama was the use of the payoff "YES WE CAN", which can be read in terms of brand. Following Semprini (1993, p.55), we can define the brand as the set of speeches on a brand by all the actors (both individual and group) involved in its generation.

This definition emphasizes the need to understand the semiotic nature of the brand, namely its ability to make sense and to become a possible world, made of imagery and values. This way, we overcome the standard model of brand communication, in which the brand speaks for itself with the aim of generating brand awareness (knowledge of the voters), and we reach a new process of brand communication, in which the brand encourages the public to talk through the involvement of voters, making itself known to the voters themselves and to the media through social networks (people recruitment).

Figure 7: Evolution of the brand construction process

OLD MODEL

BRAND SPEAKS
FOR ITSELF

AWARENESS

NEW MODEL

**BRAND
GENERATES
TALKS**

COMMITMENT

Source: Our elaboration

In this scenario, the user takes an active role in creating the viral aspect and in building the brand. The Internet is not involved in the ways used to build the brand (which are necessary conditions, but not sufficient to determine the success), but in the communication process. The set of values and images associated with the Obama brand is, in short, represented by hope and change, values that depend not only on the candidate running for election, but

especially on the voter who can make this change real. The payoff "YES WE CAN" contains exactly this concept, strengthened in the website: "I'm asking you to believe. Not just in my ability to bring real change in Washington... I'm asking you to believe in yourself. "The citizen, or more precisely the citizen's ego, is placed at the center of the imagery, so the citizen can believe himself to be the co-star of the change together with the politician. In this sense, the Obama brand policy is entirely consistent with overall strategy and has encouraged the viral diffusion of the message, summarized in the words "YES WE CAN".

Another interesting case for the way involvement strategy was designed is the activity of Ségolène Royal, who used the site http://www.desirsdavenir.com as a fulcrum of the campaign. Many instruments of involvement could be found within the website:

- Registration on the site, by providing zip code and mobile phone number;

- Search tool for local committees, to bring active supporters together with those who are seeking information;

- Possibility to open a blog affiliated to the candidate's blog;

- Possibility to financially support the campaign.

A special section was dedicated to the activation phase: http://emilitants.desirsdavenir.org. The traditional function "Invite your friends" was accompanied by the following message, which well explains the logic of involvement that characterized the whole campaign:

"[2]Good morning,

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[2] Source: http://emilitants.desirsdavenir.org. Our translation.

come visit me and take part in the campaign of Ségolène Royal!
On http://emilitants.desirsdavenir.org you can discover everything you can do to get involved in the campaign and help Ségolène Royal win next May. Debating on the forums, signaling interesting contents, making a video, animating a blog: there's plenty of opportunities to make your voice heard!
Now more than ever, we must be successful in the debate!
See you soon!"

As is clear from the quotation, it mainly stimulated online involvement, by identifying different profiles:

- *E-débatteur*s, who discuss on the various forums and blogs in favor of the electoral project;

- *E-veilleurs,* who monitor the network;

- *E-créateurs,* who create audio-visual material for the campaign.

Moreover, much of the campaign was set not only on the candidate's blog, but also on the supporters' blogs, linked to each other's and with those of the party through a platform named "Ségoland".

Online Social Network

Online social networks can be used in the stages of acquisition, activation and defense. Particularly for the acquisition phase, social network sites are used as an analysis tool of the target and the networks it belongs to. Starting from this analysis, we can recognize advertising campaigns aimed at specific segments of the population. Facebook, for example, offers both textual and graphic advertising in which we can indentify detailed targets. This form of advertising is particularly interesting for political purposes due to its flexibility: it can be used to both reach small groups and encourage the acquisition of

individuals, and to encourage the diffusion of viral messages along with other tools.

In general, a candidate's presence on Facebook must be managed through a clear reference area, the pivot of the entire visibility and relation project: the fan page, which allows the candidate to acquire a series of contacts (who can become fans of the politician) by constantly updating the wall with the daily political activity. If the fan page is well designed and managed, we can make it the landing page (destination page) of the advertising actions on Facebook, so as not to force the user to exit the platform where he is.

Activities on online social networks can continue during the activation phase, and integrate with other tools. First of all, announcing events on Facebook facilitates the diffusion of the invitations and managing the participants. Secondly, groups created by users on issues interesting for the political campaign, once indentified, can be involved by taking specific actions (advertising, enrollment and direct intervention), especially if composed of individuals classified as potential evangelists. Thirdly, individuals who have already been activated must be stimulated, by providing all the necessary technical and methodological tools, to create Facebook groups to disseminate the candidate's ideas and for aggregation purposes. Groups created based on the geographical area or specific theme of interest tend to be more effective. In groups, unlike the pages, the founder and the administrators are visible to all: this allows to easily spot the local person of reference for the campaign, and also to gratify those involved in the political campaign through their affiliation.

During the presidential campaign, Barack Obama used his fan page and that of his wife Michelle. Moreover, several groups were created on Facebook for each State and interest group. The main Barack Obama group generated more than 3 million supporters. The number of members, which of course should be calibrated based on the candidate's political catchment area, is

impressive, as are the number and the characterization of the groups. Basically every considerably-sized college and city had its own support group for Barack Obama. This was the result of an attentive and effective activation policy, which stimulated the transition from the acquisition to the activation phase through the integrated use of different instruments. One of the most original instruments was a Facebook application which allowed users to show their support by adding a box (which included links to stories and videos of the campaign) to their profiles, to become Barack Obama's friends, and to participate in the relevant groups. A special feature was available for potential evangelists, which helped them find local Obama groups and encouraged them to get involved, for example by phoning or sending messages to friends residing in the most hard-fought States. As evidence of the effectiveness of the involvement strategy, independent supporters also launched applications, such as "Obama '08", which allowed users to send virtual gifts, all Obama-focused, to friends on Facebook. The online social network is also an interesting defense tool, especially to study opposers. Research tools and the group-membership mechanism through the profiles enable the candidate's team to know:

- The opposers' numerousness;

- The type of opposers;

- The opposers' arguments, disclosed in discussions;

- The issues discussed on the web and how it this is influenced by the agenda power setting of traditional media (McCombs and Shaw, 2003)

Micro-blogging

Micro-blogging, particularly Twitter, can be used in the process of acquisition and activation. This tool is generally used to focus attention, and keep it focused, on the campaign, and to bring voters close to the candidate by establishing a channel for direct communication.

In the acquisition phase, marking the everyday political activity through Tweets brings a constant renewal of potential voters' activation and of the attention of traditional mass media.

During activation, we can encourage supporters to use micro-blogging tools as a channel for updating the candidate on activities: this operation fosters loyalty and encourages the shift from a simple "agreement relationship" to a relationship based on word of mouth, evangelism and sense of belonging. The integration between Twitter and Facebook allows to simultaneously update all platforms, in a perspective of total integration between the candidate's messages and of continuous relationship with the supporters. The tool is particularly useful in the final rush of electoral campaign, where the goal is to keep attention strong and bring potential voters to action.

Barack Obama's electoral campaign, which started using Twitter in April 2007, flooded the followers with links to new videos and interviews, updated them on Obama's news and progress on the presidential run, and alerted them on programmed gatherings or planned appearances during demonstrations.

Web search engine

Web search engines can be used in the phase of acquisition and defense. They are especially useful because of their ability to capture the attention of

people who are seeking information on a particular topic. First of all, using statistics on search volume and their projection over time (e.g. Google Insight and Google tool keywords), we can monitor the trends of searches for politically interesting keywords, in order to identify the issues on which to focus.

During acquisition, the purchase of keywords through Google Adwords and Yahoo! Search Marketing programs is a powerful way to appeal to those strongly interested in certain political issues, and therefore who are more likely become active subjects. Before Election Day, Obama's team published geo-targeting ads which counted down the days until vote: "Three Days, Two Days, One Day, Vote Today." Moreover, the electoral team purchased ads on keywords related to important news or controversial topics in the media, in coordination with the press office.

During the defense phase, search engines can be used to seek information on major threats. The purchase of sponsored ads which appear when the user types certain keywords is an effective strategy to reduce the visibility of opposers' arguments indexed in the organic results of the engine.

Photo and video sharing

File sharing sites have a dual purpose in the political campaign:

- Contain all video and photographic material collected during the candidate's political activities, particularly regarding the electoral campaign;

- Invite users to share and virally spread this material, as well as to create new material.

YouTube, the most widely used video sharing website, must be the virtual container in which to converge all of the candidate's video material. During activation, the first level of participation is the possibility for the user to subscribe to a channel and receive updates on newly uploaded videos. Secondly, the user can share a video with other users. Moreover, the user can comment on a video and discuss its contents with others, even broadcast his own video on the matter. It is crucial all these activities be carried out on a same site, in order to track activities and facilitate content diffusion (Miller 2009).

Obama's campaign provided a YouTube channel which condensed 1,800 videos during the only election period. The channel attracted more than 114,500 subscribers, and was linked to a page of BarackObama.com which contained a video message to welcome users to the official campaign website and encourage people to register on it, by filling out a form to receive campaign-related communications. In this case, therefore, the instrument was not used exclusively in the activation phase, but also in the acquisition phase. We can observe the same logic in the pictures taken during the political campaign and posted on Flickr, currently the worldwide reference site for photo sharing.

E-mail and mobile marketing

E-mail is a useful tool during the entire election campaign, in all stages of acquisition, activation and defense. For the acquisition phase, you can rent databases of e-mail addresses and use them for multiple purposes, such us broadcasting to the potential voters the political issues of the campaign, collecting subscriptions (in order to build our own contact database) and raising funds.

In Obama's case, the e-mail database built during the campaign reached 13 million addresses and was a key factor in collecting funds. Each day of the campaign more than 100 different e-mail versions were sent out, segmented demographically, geographically, and according to the history of the supporter's donations.

During activation, e-mail is a useful tool to involve and manage relationships with subjects who have already been activated as well as with those still to be activated.

In Obama's case, e-mails were used as activation tool on a local level: each time the organizers arrived in a State, district or city, they received a database of email addresses of local voters who were already available to volunteer in support of the campaign. Organizers could then quickly recruit local staff.

Obama also used e-mail in the defense phase, for example when Sarah Palin, during her opening speech for her vice-presidential campaign, seemed to mock Obama's experience on online community organization, indirectly attacking his supporters.

An e-mail was sent out to Obama supporters, which pointed out the fact that Sarah Palin had attacked them. Following this email, a total of USD 11 million were collected, the largest sum ever put together in a single day of electoral campaign in the history of American politics. Furthermore, e-mail was generally used to send evaluations of major campaign events, such as results of the primary elections, impressions on debates, and news on surveys. This aimed to create a solid relationship with voters.

As far as mobile marketing is concerned, such a tool can be used in both the acquisition and activation phases. In particular, you can implement a system of short codes and keywords on specific topics of the campaign. In this system, the user can send an text message containing a keyword on a political theme to a mobile number and receive automatic responses coherent

with the candidate's program. So, thanks to this texting system we can involve potential voters located in areas without internet access. For example, during campaign talks and on promotional street banners, the public was encouraged not to visit a website, but to send a text.

This means we can activate a potential voter even when he is not sitting front of a computer.

After such systems are defined, we should built a clear affiliation program, on three levels:

1. Systems of tangible incentives

2. Systems of viral diffusion

3. Membership rituals

Incentive systems consist in tangible actions aimed at persuading potential voters to register in exchange for something (e.g. ring tones, background images, stickers, etc.).

Viral delivery systems consist in actions that encourage the recipient to distribute or forward the message to other users.

Membership rituals are occasions of involvement in which the campaign is developed (e.g. events, rallies), within which we can study the rituals of belonging when a candidate or famous person encourages people to take some action.

During the acquisition phase the aim is to introduce the candidate and his political ideas to potential voters. The type of message will therefore focus on contents meant to emphasize a strong point of the candidate's program or, during the campaign, on the hottest issues and current affairs. In the activation phase the objective is to stimulate the sympathizer (and provide him with the necessary tools) to propagate the message within his network. At this

stage the type of message can either invite the supporter to events and demonstrations or supply a useful instruction guide for becoming operative.

Consistent with its strategy, the "Obama for America" mobile marketing campaign was designed to exploit the mobile channel to mobilize volunteers and encourage citizens to vote. The campaign was based on the shortcode 62262, which spells "Obama" if typed on a numeric keypad. More than 50,000 single keywords were activated on this short code: from "Iraq" to "jobs" for the issues of interest, from "FL" to "OH" and all other State names, down to every zip code in the United States. The 62262 code was integrated with all other media: billboards, television ads, radio, TV appearances.

The campaign invested heavily, in the acquisition phase, on the construction of its "opt-in" database through incentives like ringtones and wallpapers, offered for limited time and through key television commercials (like the one aired during the 2008 Super Bowl, which encouraged viewers to send the word "hope"). It also used key issues of the political agenda on the media to promote registrations: for example, after Obama assured himself the Democratic Party nomination and there was an ongoing wild speculation about who would be the vice- presidential candidate, whoever was interested could send "VP" to 62262 to receive the first official announcement of the vice- presidential campaign.

In addition to collecting this information, the campaign managed to develop detailed profiles of supporters and took every opportunity to broaden these profiles simply by requesting additional information (e.g. "Reply with your zip code) or by offering incentives such as invitations to special events or campaign gadgets like stickers and T-shirts. Users then received 5-20 messages a month depending on the depth of their involvement and the stage of the campaign. The local vocation was also evident in the iPhone application, which can use the GPS and Google Maps to determine the location of users and direct them to local events or campaign offices. This is a

useful feature in the acquisition phase. The application also organized, divided by State, the contacts in the user's address book, allowing to indicate whether a contact was "interested in Obama," "not interested" or had "already decided". This information was then sent anonymously to the campaign team, while a general council, who classified users based on the number of calls made, motivated supporters to make repeated appeals and encouraging their constant activation.

Conclusion

The general slowness and caution of political actors in investing in the Internet derives from, among other factors, the inability to approach in a truly planned way the development of political consensus via the new media. The approach we suggest here, integrated in the overall process of political marketing, is divided into three phases (acquire, activate and defend), and each one makes a specific use of the tools offered by the Internet. This planning approach aims to fully exploit each Internet- based instrument and to effectively manage an orientation campaign on political consensus. The ultimate goal of this approach is to create involvement, word of mouth and bring users to become leaders and spokespersons of the potential candidate's political idea or program, fully exploiting the resources of their social networks. These are the social networks that, thanks to online tools, we can know, approach and involve for political purposes as never before.

The described model is useful to fully exploit the relational potential of the Net, to elevate the role of the Internet in building political consensus and to provide a common approach in planning and managing the campaign, considered a series of steps and tools within a broader political marketing process. Moreover, we can easily foresee that Internet spaces will be increasingly used

to guide the consensus, as happened and is happening with the other media, and undeniably any candidate who will neglect to use the Internet as a tool for promotional, analysis and orientation purposes will put himself at a disadvantage compared to opponents. Future directions of research can be orientated to explore the following topics related to the present model:

- Understanding the actual impact that Internet tools have on the political campaign, reasoning upon an overall logic of mix of marketing tools and considering the digital divide-related issues (e.g. Sartori, 2006) and the socio-demographic and political peculiarities of Internet users;

- Extending the consensus-building strategy via the Internet from the electoral campaign to the legislature, to verify the adaptability of the model;

- Investigating the problems which occur in applying the solutions herein identified to different local contexts (for example, starting with the analysis by Plasser and Plasser 2002, which underlines that electoral campaign innovations may be used only to the extent in which they can be adapted to the local, social, political and cultural conditions).

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