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Social websites in electoral campaigns – Facebook profiles of Bronisław Komorowski, Barack Obama and Mitt Romney

KEY WORDS

electoral campaign, political marketing, new media, social network sites, electoral rhetoric, Facebook

ABSTRACT

The article describes the scope, forms, and means of using the mobilisation and engagement potential of the new media in electoral campaigns. It is illustrated by the case of the social network site Facebook for in-depth analysis. The paper then presents how social network can be used to support traditional discursive functions, such as attack, acclaim, defense, contrast, and so on. The article also aims at showing the style and form of electoral communication in the social media. The observations and conclusions in the paper are based on the analysis of posts published on the official Facebook profiles by Bronisław Komorowski (Polish presidential campaign in 2010) as well as Barack Obama and Mitt Romney (US presidential campaign in 2012).

The practitioners and researchers of political communicating as well as the theoreticians of the network society point out that the development of the Internet and above all the phenomena, media, and institutions collectively known as Web 2.0 or social media may lead to a deep transformation of political communication¹. The Web 2.0 transformation, or even revolution, should primarily involve the change of the current top-down communication paradigm into the network or bottom-up communication. The former is being carried out through the traditional media (political public relations) or paid communication channels

¹ Cf. e.g.: J. Trippi, *The revolution will not be televised: Democracy, the Internet and the overthrow of everything*, New York 2004; D. Batorski, J.M. Zając, *Kampania w sieci: analiza wyborów samorządowych 2010 roku* [Web campaign: The analysis of the local elections of 2010], Warszawa 2011; S. Książkiewicz, *Wpływ Web 2.0 na procesy komunikacji politycznej* [The influence of Web 2.0 on the political communication processes], in: B. Jung (ed.), *Wokół mediów ery Web 2.0* [Focus on the media of the Web 2.0 era], Warszawa 2010, p. 141–171; M. Castells, *Władza komunikacji* [Communication power], Warszawa 2013.

(political advertising). In this paradigm the recipients are regarded as a passive, homogenous community that is the object of the communication process².

Conversely, the bottom-up communication model assumes that recipients form a network of individualised, active, and empowered participants in communication. The channels of this type of communication are social media, which give the voters new means to directly interact with the politicians. From the viewpoint of the voters and the democratic system as a whole, some of the key benefits of the media 2.0 might involve the lowering of economic, psychological, and behavioural costs of actively engaging oneself in electoral campaigns. In short, this form of running a campaign is seen as the cure for the growing apathy, cynicism, and discouragement of voters. According to some scholars, these negative phenomena are caused by the image of the politics and the elections created by the old media and the traditional methods of running and coverage of campaigns³. The offer of the Web 2.0 media also includes new ways of more direct interaction between voters and politicians. Potentially therefore, they may contribute to the empowerment of the voter and make him or her an active participant, or even a sender of the content of the electoral communication process.

From the point of view of political actors, the social media may offer a unique ability to contact their voters without the party institutions and traditional media as intermediaries⁴. The dependency on party organisation limits the odds of both the candidates who do not belong to the establishment and novel political ideas. The media, in turn, select and frame the campaign communications, forcing their own interpretations which often clash with the intentions of their senders, the politicians. The media are also often accused of chasing the sensation, scandal, and spectacle, which lead to the tabloidisation, entertainisation, and banalization of politics⁵. By reducing the campaign to a horse race between the main competitors, the media decrease the odds of a rational and truly pluralistic debate on important political issues. Thus politicians, liberated by the new media from the limitations and requirements of the old ones (air time, volume of newspapers, etc.) and the costs of paid

² S. Książkiewicz, *Wpływ Web 2.0...*, op. cit., p. 142–147.

³ J.N. Cappella, K.H. Jamieson, *Spiral of cynicism: The press and the public good*, New York 1997.

⁴ This aspect has been stressed by Joe Trippi, American political consultant and the author of the first Web 2.0 campaign of Howard Dean; see: J. Trippi, *The revolution will not be televised...*, op. cit.

⁵ D. Piontek, *Komunikowanie polityczne i kultura popularna: Tabloidyzacja informacji o polityce* [Political communication and popular culture: The tabloidization of the information on politics], Poznań 2011.

electoral advertising, could get the opportunity to present their full programs and develop rational argumentations⁶.

The list of issues associated with the influence of social media on the political and electoral communication is obviously much longer. Here, however, what is the most important is their mobilisation potential and the ability to engage recipients in the campaign. The scope and ways of using this potentials by the staffs of presidential candidates constitute the first of the research questions in this paper. The subsequent research area is to what extent the use of new media changes the classical arrangement of the functions and content of electoral campaign. Are the social media truly the forum to present a program? Do the new media abandon the traditional attack rhetoric?

Facebook and the American and Polish presidential campaigns – the justification of the choice of analysed material

The choice of Facebook as the subject of the analysis was due to the quantitative and qualitative reasons. At the present time, this service is the second (after the Google search engine) most popular website both worldwide and on the local markets in the US and in Poland⁷. Regarding the sheer number of users, Facebook is now the largest social website in the world. It also holds the first place among the social web services in Poland⁸.

From the qualitative perspective it can be said that community websites, and Facebook in particular, are the embodiment of the idea of social media. The users of the service create their own representations, their profiles. They then create their own social networks centred on these profiles (with the “add to friends” and “like” functions). Facebook users can communicate both on the one-to-one basis and one-to-many. The service allows sharing content (video, images, links to media), commenting, and rating it (the already mentioned “like” function). In other words, it is a platform of communication which perfectly fits the Media 2.0 concept. Both the size and the manner in which Facebook operates make this

⁶ The analyses of the online viewership of the video clips from Obama’s 2008 campaign showed, for instance, that many users watched long video materials, which could not be broadcast in full on the TV due to air time limits. See: M. Sifry, A. Rasiej, *Welcome to the age of the sound blast*, “Politico” 2008, <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0308/9222.html> [accessed: 05 Nov 2008].

⁷ Data from November 2014, quoted from alexa.com, <http://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/facebook.com>; data from Poland, <http://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/PL> [accessed: 16 Oct 2014].

⁸ According to the Megapanel PBI/Gemius survey from August 2014: Ł. Szewczyk, media2.pl, *Megapanel sierpień 2014: Wzrosty YouTube i TVN, Facebook i portale na minusie* [Megapanel August 2014: YouTube and TVN growing, Facebooks and portals on the decline, <http://media2.pl/badania/114832-Megapanel-sierpien-2014-Wzrosty-YouTube-i-TVN-Facebook-i-portale-na-minusie.html> [accessed: 16 Oct 2014].

community service a perfect playground to test the hypothesis of the transformation of political communication by the Web 2.0 media.

The inclusion of the American electoral campaign as one of the analysed subjects is supported by at least two valid arguments. First, the sheer scale of financial, human, technological, and intellectual resources involved in American political campaigns make them the vanguard of marketing innovation. The particularities of the electoral system, the financing of political parties, and the large caste of professional political advisors favour further development of new methods and techniques of electoral communication⁹. It is worth adding here that the impulse for a theoretical discussion on the transformation of political communication under the influence of the new media was the 2008 campaign of Barack Obama, in which the new media were used on an unprecedented quantitative and qualitative scale¹⁰.

The second, and perhaps even more important, argument for the analysis of American campaigns is the diffusion of American ideas, strategies, and techniques of running campaigns, observed for many decades¹¹. The diffusion and implementation of electoral innovations are often called the Americanisation of political communication. Considerable evidence of this process can be seen in Poland as well, both in the form and content of electoral campaigns and in the behaviour of politicians and so-called spin doctors. In Polish campaigns, the form and content of American advertisements and websites are being copied, with mixed success, while the media report that Polish politician travel over the ocean to learn electoral communication. American electoral campaigns are also worth studying because they may provide some clues about the future of campaigns in Poland. Out of the vast number of electoral campaigns in the American political system, is obviously the presidential campaigns are obviously the largest and most saturated with innovation, which determined the choice of the profiles of the Democratic nominee Barack Obama and the Republican Mitt Romney as subjects for the analysis.

⁹ D.M. Farrell, *Political consultancy overseas: The internationalization of campaign consultancy*, "PS: Political Science & Politics", No. 31 (2), 1998, p. 171–178.

¹⁰ Cf. e.g.: L.J. Sabato, *The year of Obama. How Barack Obama won the White House*. New York 2010; T. Olczyk, *Kampania 2.0? Internet w kampanii Baracka Obamy a nowe zjawiska w komunikacji politycznej* [Campaign 2.0? The Internet in the campaign of Barack Obama and the new phenomena in political communication], in: M. Jeziński, A. Seklecka, W. Peszyński (eds.), *Polityczne aspekty nowych mediów* [Political aspects of the new media], Toruń 2010, s. 9–22.

¹¹ M. Mazur, *Amerykanizacja polskich kampanii wyborczych?* [Americanisation of Polish electoral campaigns], in: S. Drobczyński, K. Churska–Nowak (eds.), *Profesjonalizacja i mediatyzacja kampanii politycznych w Polsce* [Professionalization and mediatization of political campaigns in Poland], Poznań 2011, p. 18–22.

The choice of the chief candidates in the American presidential elections determined the selection of their Polish counterpart. The aim of the study was to ascertain how much the mainstream of political communication is changing, particularly on the sending side. For this reason the decision was made to compare the Polish and American campaigns of chief candidates. Out of the two most important candidates in the 2010 presidential elections, only Bronisław Komorowski had an official Facebook profile. The research conducted also in Poland suggests that the outsiders who tend to seek the support of the new media more strongly, both in quantitative and qualitative ways; as such, they do not represent the mainstream of political communication¹². Because of this, the Facebook profile of Bronisław Komorowski is the only Polish profile included in the study.

The presentation of detailed results of comparisons between the above needs to be preceded by the presentation of the various context in which the tools of political communication are used in the US and in Poland. The most significant factors, from the perspective of the potential of social media, seem to be the traditions of engaging in the election and political voluntarism. These models are very strong in the US¹³ and virtually non-existent in Poland. Thus, the mobilisation and engagement potential of the new media falls on a more fertile ground in the US than in Poland. The second difference is in the financing of the campaigns, in particular the eligibility of payments from private persons in the US. Online micropayments were one of the roots of Obama's political success¹⁴. In Poland, the law prohibits collecting donations for political purposes, thus eliminating this aspect of voters' involvement in the campaign. The system differences are also significant. The US presidential candidates – unlike their Polish counterparts – compete not only for the function of the head of the state but also the chief of the executive. It has a profound influence on the candidates' political programmes and – consequently – on their role in political communication.

All the factors which make studying American electoral campaigns attractive – finances, professionalization, technological innovation – also make them more difficult to compare with other countries. On the other hand, though, such a comparison broadens considerably the theoretical and research perspective.

¹² D. Batorski, *Internet w kampanii wyborczej 2011* [Internet in the electoral campaign of 2011], Warszawa 2012, p. 11.

¹³ S. Maskett, *Did Obama's ground game matter? The influence of local field offices during 2008 presidential elections*, "Public Opinion Quarterly" 2009, No. 5, p. 1023–1029.

¹⁴ J.A.Vargas, *Obama raised half a billion online*, "Washington Post" 2008, http://voices.washingtonpost.com/44/2008/11/20/obama_raised_half_a_billion_on.html [accessed: 18 Apr 2010]. David Plouffe, the manager of Obama's first campaign, also dedicates much room to the role of micropayments; see: D.D. Plouffe, *The audacity to win: The inside story and lessons of Barack Obama's historic victory*, New York 2010.

Summarising, it is worth to stress that the analysed campaigns are years apart. Due to the dynamic qualitative and quantitative transformations of the new media, sometimes two years seem more like an era. For instance, according to the Megapanel PBI/Gemius survey, when Bronisław Komorowski launched his Facebook campaign in April 2010, there were 5,617,892 users of this service in Poland¹⁵. In November 2012, when the elections in the United States took place, Polish Facebook already counts 13,339,688 people¹⁶.

Selection of research material

In the case of the American electoral campaigns described here, the key issue was the selection of material. The US electoral campaigns are longer and longer, coming close to the ideal of permanent marketing. Both Romney and Obama ran their campaign virtually without interruption since 2007¹⁷. The analysis of such a long period would exceed the volume of a single paper. Moreover, it has to be stressed that a large part of this campaign was in the time of primary election. The dynamics, goals, and functions of communication during the primaries differ from those of the actual campaign. Since in general the institution of primary elections does not function in Poland, taking this period into account would additionally complicate the comparisons. For these reasons, it was necessary to limit the studied period and set the starting point for the analysis. The crucial moments of American campaigns are party conventions. It is there that the party's official nominees for the President and Vice President are nominated. By this act, the primary elections are formally closed and the campaign for the presidential office begins. The second symbolic date is the announcement of candidates for Vice President. In the 2012 elections, Mitt Romney's staff named Paul Ryan as the vice presidential candidate on 11 August 2012, even before the official Republican convention. From that date on, the campaign of both runners entered the decisive phase. Therefore, in the case of the American campaigns all posts published on the official profiles of Mitt Romney and Barack Obama between 11 August 2012 and 7 November 2012 were analysed.

The official profile of Bronisław Komorowski appeared on Facebook on 30 April 2010, so no additional limitations were necessary. All posts which appeared on

¹⁵ A. Ochman, *Megapanel kwiecień 2010* [April 2010 Megapanel], media2.pl 2010, <http://media2.pl/badania/65734-Megapanel-kwiecien-2010.html> [accessed: 28 Feb 2013].

¹⁶ Ł.Ł. Szewczyk, *Megapanel listopad 2012: YouTube wyprzedza Facebook i Onet. Spadek NK.pl* [November 2012 Megapanel: YouTube overtakes Facebook and Onet: NK.pl low], media2.pl 2010, <http://media2.pl/badania/99373-Megapanel-listopad-2012-YouTube-wyprzedza-Facebook-i-Onet.-Spadek-NK.pl.html> [accessed: 28 Feb 2013].

¹⁷ One of the first posts on the official profile of Barack Obama is the video clip of his announcement from 2007 that he would run for President.

Komorowski's profile between 30 April and 5 July 2010 (i.e. 24 hours after voting) were analysed. The basic information on the studied profiles was compiled in Table 1.

Creation of classification key

The unit of analysis was a single post. The posts were classified exclusively based on the information included in the post itself, without taking into account the hypertext to which the posts often referred. This approach seems to be a better approximation of how the posts are received by an average user. On the other hand, at the time when the data were collected, a large part of the links did not function any more. Moreover, the software used to analyse the content of the posts did not allow clicking on the links during coding.

Table 1. Main characteristics of the analysed material

	Mitt Romney	Barack Obama	Bronisław Komorowski
number of followers	12,079,020*	32,080,721*	23,611**
analysed period	11 Aug–7 Nov 2012	11 Aug–7 Nov 2012	30 Apr–5 Jul 2010
days in the analysed period	88	88	66
number of posts visible on the timeline in the analysed period	192	203	71

Source: author's own work

* status on 7 Nov 2012

** status on 23 Nov 2011

The procedure of gathering material involved entering the so-called "timeline" of the profile, in order to obtain the material, as complete as possible, from the studied period, and to create screenshots of this image, which were then cut into individual posts. The studied material was gathered from 1 to 24 November 2012. The individual posts were subsequently entered into the qualitative analysis software TAMS Analyzer. The material was then coded within this software with a code key of 26 categories in total. The core of the code key was created a priori by reference to already existing theoretical and empirical categories used in the studies on the discourse of electoral campaigns (chiefly political advertising in the TV) and the new media in political communication. However, some unexpected regularities which emerged in the material had to be taken into account in the classification key. Therefore, the

research strategy was not purely deductive, particularly at the level of code key subcategories. The principal components of the code key will be described in detail further in the paper.

Mobilisation and engagement activities and the traditional functions of the campaign

The first question under analysis was the attempt to evaluate to what extent the mobilisation and engagement potential of a community website is actively exploited by the candidates' staffs in Facebook communication. Now, a terminological digression seems to be in order. The subject literature usually distinguishes between the mobilisation and engagement functions¹⁸. Mobilisation is usually understood as an activity encouraging the users of a social website to become involved in the active promotion of a candidate, party, or political program, whereas engagement means building more lasting and deeper relationships with voters. Already at the stage of gathering data, it became clear that this distinction is of analytical nature in the studied material. In short, making an empirical distinction between these two categories turned out to be complicated and hardly prolific. For instance, it is hard to decide unambiguously whether the request to like a certain message is just a relation-building activity. Other users see both the "likes" and the "likers". Therefore, "likes" can be treated as active promotion of a candidate. This problem is common to virtually all engagement activities on the community website. Consequently, in the described study both function were combined into the common category of mobilisation–engagement appeals. This kind of appeal was defined as the answer given the recipient to the question: "What can I do for the candidate?"

The second studied category were induction appeals. On the empirical level, induction appeals should be understood as these which provide the users of the service with the answer to the question: "Why should I vote for this candidate?" Therefore, their primary function was persuasion, convincing the recipients to make a certain choice. This kind of message is obviously the essence of the classic discourse of the campaign and the main content of the traditional forms of political communication, such as political TV advertising.

The third function of the posts, which emerged a posteriori from the empirical material, was "information". It should be stressed that information is construed differently here than in the theory of web campaigning¹⁹. In this paper, information posts are these which refer users to media information. In short, they answer the question: "What do the media say

¹⁸ See, e.g.: K.A. Foot, S.M. Schneider, *Web campaigning*, Cambridge 2006, pp. 69–77 and 129–136.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 45–49.

about the candidate?” This function was not found in the American campaigns but was an important part of Bronisław Komorowski’s communication.

The distinction presented above is not exclusive. The analysed posts very often contained an induction appeal, such as a positive presentation of the candidate’s image, or a comparison of election programs, and simultaneously called for action: to share or like the communication.

The distribution of these three principal functions in the analysed set of posts is illustrated by Chart 1.

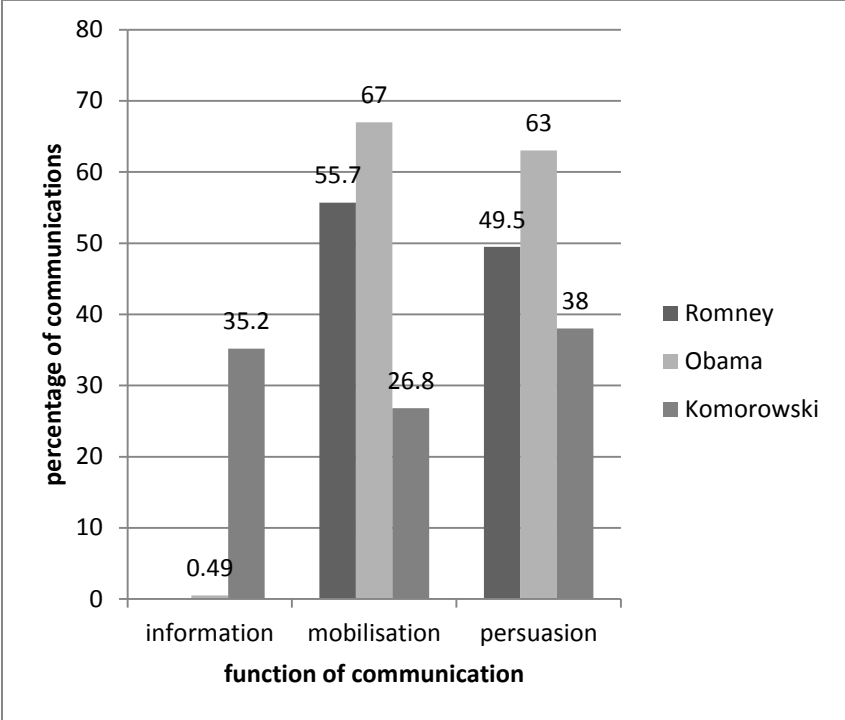


Chart 1. Three types of electoral communications in community websites

Percentaging bases: Romney, n = 192; Obama, n = 203; Komorowski, n = 71

Source: author’s own work

As can be seen in Chart 1, in the case of American candidates, mobilisation–engagement posts are the most commonly found type of appeal. It is worth noting here that the percentages of both the induction and mobilisation posts are higher for Obama and exceed 60 %. Obama’s staff combines both appeals in the communications most. By doing so, the Democrat’s campaign uses the users of the social network built around the candidate’s profile to “disseminate” induction messages. In the case of the Polish candidate, the main function of the communication is the traditional “persuasion” (27 posts). The second place (with 25 posts)

belongs to “information”. It means that, to a large extent, the Civic Platform (Pol. *Platforma Obywatelska – PO*) candidate gave up the space in his profile to media communications outside of the campaign. Komorowski’s staff did not make any significant efforts to exploit the mobilisation–engagement potential of the service. A more detailed classification of mobilisation appeals shows, that in the case of Bronisław Komorowski these messages were mostly calling for using the website, video chat, etc., while engagement was generally limited to the candidate’s thanks. Table 2 shows the distribution of subcategories of mobilisation–engagement communications.

Table 2. Subcategories of mobilisation–engagement appeals

activity	Mitt Romney		Barack Obama		Bronisław Komorowski	
	number	percentage	number	percentage	number	percentage
application	3	2.8	8	5.88	6	31.58
interaction	3	2.8	2	1.47	6	31.58
purchase of gadgets/ payment	57	53.27	31	22.79	–	–
watching debates together	5	4.67	4	2.94	4	21.05
petition/ signature	4	3.74	3	2.21	–	–
charity	2	1.87	2	1.47	1	5.26
share/ like	11	10.28	52	38.24	–	–
voting	5	4.67	15	11.03	2	10.53
voluntarism	17	15.89	11	10.28	–	–
voters’ registration	–	–	6	4.41	–	–
total	107	–	136	–	19	–

Source: author’s own work

As seen in Table 2, the mobilisation–engagement communication is quite varied. In the case of Romney, a relatively high percentage (more than 53 %) of this type of communications concerned the purchase of company gadgets and donations for the campaign. Obama’s profile showed less such messages, almost 23 %. At the same time, the Democrat’s staff very often called for the sharing (38.4 %) of the published posts. It is also in Obama’s profile that the messages appeared which reminded of the requirement to register as voters and the vote itself. Both the Democratic and Republican candidates quite often called for active involvement in the campaign (voluntarism) and to use applications, websites, video

chat, etc. The rare category of “interaction” included all the communications in which the candidate addressed the voters directly (in the first person), mostly with thanks.

Classic functions of electoral campaign discourse at a community website

The second analysed question was the realisation of the traditional functions of electoral campaign discourse. The most comprehensive conception of the functions of electoral campaign discourse was put forth by William Benoit²⁰. The idea is based on the assumption that elections are an act of comparison. The elections are won by the candidate who presents him- or herself more favourably than his or her competitors. This means that candidates have to stand out from the opponents. The main function of the communications sent during the campaign is, therefore, to deliver information allowing the candidates to favourably distinguish themselves. This process is carried out using four main functions of electoral discourse, namely attack, acclaim (candidate’s positive self-presentation), defence (reaction to an opponent’s attack), and comparing the candidate with his or her competitors²¹. In the research into political TV advertising, these four functions are usually reduced to two main ones: attacking (negative campaign) and acclaiming (positive campaign). Negative campaign is aimed at decreasing the support of the opponent, while positive communication is meant to strengthen the candidate’s support in the target group. The negativism of electoral campaigns and their specific tools, such as political TV advertising, for once, has been analysed almost since the beginning of the studies on modern television electoral campaigns. The majority of American research, encompassing campaigns ran from the 1950s on, stress the increasing quantitative dominance of attacking communications²². This tendency, albeit lacking such a detailed and long-term research, can also be observed in Poland²³. The growing negativism of campaigns is considered as a negative phenomenon contributing to the cynicism and apathy of voters²⁴. Therefore, the analysis of this aspect of electoral communication in social media services may provide the answer to the question if the new media favour the reduction of such

²⁰ L.M. Brazeal, W.L. Benoit, *A functional analysis of congressional television spots, 1986–2000*, “Communication Quarterly” 2001, Vol. 49, No. 4, p. 436–454.

²¹ W.L. Benoit, J.R. Blaney, P.M. Pier, *Campaign '96: a functional analysis of acclaiming, attacking, and defending*, Westport 1998, p. 3–14.

²² T. Olczyk, *Politrozrywka i popperswazja: Reklama telewizyjna w polskich kampaniach wyborczych XXI wieku* [Polit-entertainment and pop-persuasion: Television advertising in Polish electoral campaigns in the 21st century], Warszawa 2009, p. 50.

²³ P. Dudek, *Negatywna reklama polityczna: Telewizyjne spoty wyborcze w kampanii parlamentarnej w 2007 r.*, “Studia Medioznawcze” 2008, No. 3 (38), p. 87–72; in English: eadem, *Negative Political Advertising: Parliamentary Election 2007 Campaign TV Spots*, “Studia Medioznawcze” – Media Studies website, http://sm.id.uw.edu.pl/Numery/2008_3_34/dudek-en.pdf [accessed: 7 July 2015 – TN].

²⁴ S. Ansolabehere, S.S. Iyengar, *Going negative: how political advertisements shrink and polarize the electorate*, New York 1997.

negative phenomena. The occurrence statistics for individual function in the persuasion communications on studied profiles is shown in Table 2.

As can be seen in Table 3, in the American campaigns of the analysed period, purely negative communications constituted roughly one fifth of all persuasive communications published by the electoral staffs on the candidates' profiles. Greater differences were seen in positive communications, which made up almost two thirds of the communications in the case of the Democratic candidate, and a little less than a half in the case of his opponent. The electoral rhetoric on Facebook turns out to be decisively more positive than the rhetoric of the traditional instruments of electoral communication, such as political TV ads. In the American electoral campaign of 2012, positive communications made up only 14.4 % of Barack Obama's TV ads and 20.4 % of Romney's, with negative communications amounting to 58.1 % and 49 % respectively²⁵. The profile of Bronisław Komorowski was dominated by positive communications, and only one post was an attack on the opponent.

Table 3. Functions of persuasion communications

	Mitt Romney		Barack Obama		Bronisław Komorowski	
activity	number	percentage	number	percentage	number	percentage
attacking	20	21.05	22	17.19	1	3.7
defending	1	1.05	1	0.78	–	–
comparing	32	33.68	19	14.84	–	–
acclaiming	42	44.21	86	67.19	26	96.3
total inductive	95	–	128	–	19	–

Source: author's own work

It is hard to unequivocally tell if this phenomenon is thanks to the medium itself. One should remember that political advertisements are targeted at a different target group than Facebook posts. Regardless of the causes, the relative advantage of positive rhetoric seems to corroborate the transformative influence of the new media on electoral communication. Positive communication is also more favourable for the process of election and the citizens' attitude towards politics.

The second significant theme in the traditional research on electoral communication is the content of the messages, and particularly the opposition between the election program and

²⁵ E.F. Fowler, T.N. Ridout, *Negative, angry and ubiquitous: Political advertising in 2012*, "The Forum" 2013, Vol. 10, No. 4, p. 58–59.

the personal image of the candidate²⁶. Based on the conceptions developed in the research on political advertising, a candidate's positions and preferences on various political and socio-economic issues, as well as diagnoses and proposed solutions to the topical problems of political discussions can be considered as program communication (e.g. issue ads, policy ads). Whereas the image communication (e.g. image ads, character ads) focus on the personal traits of a candidate. Many scholars claim that for many decades the analysis of campaign contents has been literally dominated by this distinction²⁷. In the case of this opposition the tendency is not as straightforward and obvious as with the negativism, yet the researchers are rather in favour of the thesis that the image components and personality of a candidate prevail in the traditional forms of electoral communication²⁸.

The proportions between the image and program communication in all three analysed campaigns are compared in Chart 2.

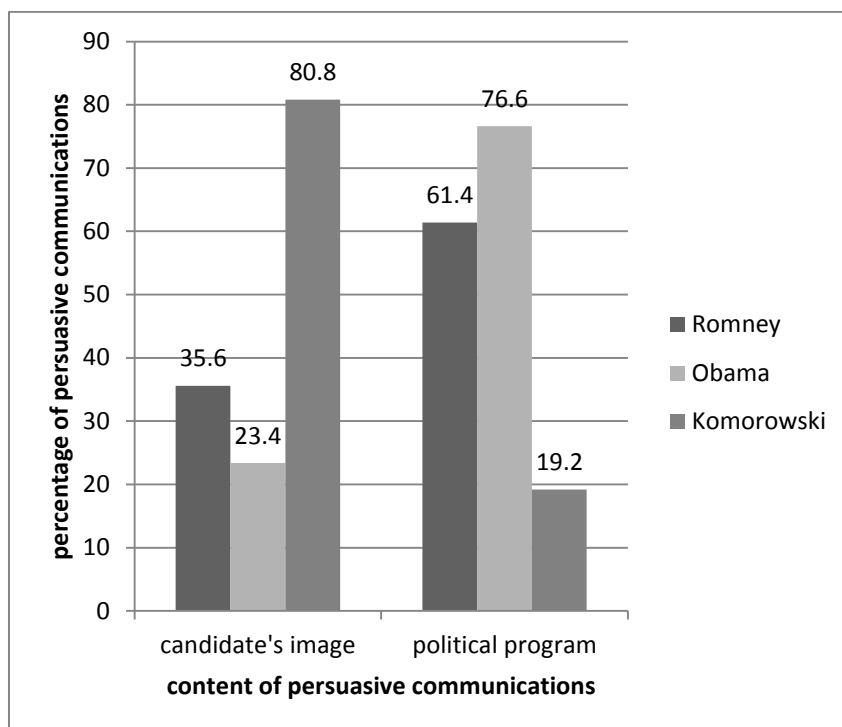


Chart 2. Content of persuasive communications

Percentaging bases: Romney, n = 95; Obama, n = 128; Komorowski, n = 27

Source: author's own work

²⁶ L.L. Kaid, A. Johnston, *Videostyle in presidential campaigns: style and content of televised political advertising*, Westport 2001, p. 14–16.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 16.

²⁸ D.M. West, *Air wars: television advertising in election campaigns 1952–2008*, Washington 2010, p. 51.

In the Facebook communications from the American candidates, program communications dominate (61.4 % of Romney’s communications and 76.6 % of Obama’s). Whereas Komorowski’s communication is dominated by image information (80.8 %). This difference may be partially explained by the already mentioned different role of the President in the Polish and American political systems. Still, this difference warrants deeper analysis.

Form of posts

The final analysed characteristic of Facebook posts was their formal aspect. This component of the classification key was created by induction. Two formal categories of posts emerged already at the stage of gathering material. Some posts were dominated by visual information, while text communication prevailed in the other group (see Chart 3). In the case of Facebook, a communication is never purely textual, if only for the fact that the text is always accompanied by the picture of the owner of the profile. The linked textual content often also include some visual components, such as miniature graphics or photos. Still, this classification, while much simplified, demonstrated very interesting and sharp differences between the analysed campaigns (see Chart 3).

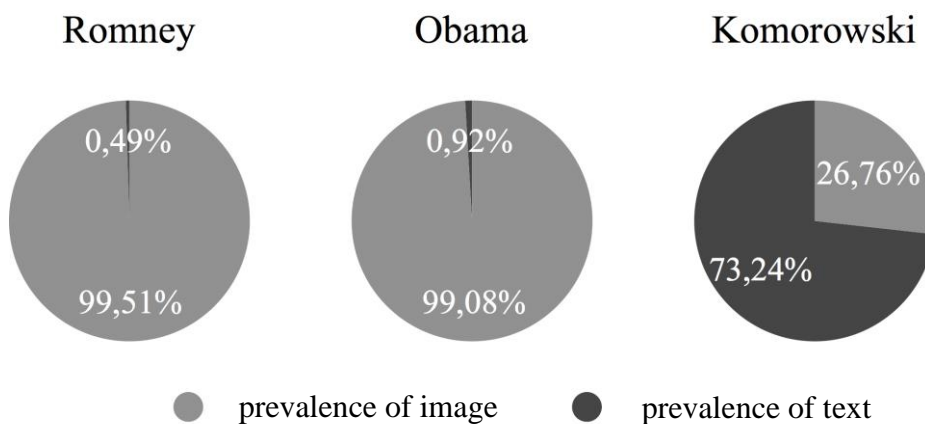


Chart 3. Communications with the prevalence of text and image

Percentaging bases: Romney, n = 192; Obama, n = 203; Komorowski, n = 71

Source: author’s own work

In the profiles of the American presidential candidates, an overwhelming dominance of visual information can be seen. Almost the entire communication of Romney (99.5 %) and Obama (98.6 %) are communications in which image prevails. Whereas Komorowski’s profile is almost in three quarters textual (52 of 71 posts). Based on three examples, it is

difficult to judge categorically which form of communication is more natural and typical for such a medium as Facebook. However, such a great difference, combined with the more qualitative comparisons, seems to indicate that community websites, or at least Facebook, are rather iconic media (cf. Figure 1). This statement is all the more interesting that, so far, Facebook was recognised as a textual medium, as opposed to the video service YouTube.

Due to the stylistic diversity of posts, a more detailed formal distinctions were introduced. The Facebook communications from candidates were grouped into: infographics, posters, videos, photos, text messages, and links to media. It seems that photos, videos, and text are categories which do not require any lengthier comment. Whereas infographics are quite an interesting novelty in this list.

Infographics should be understood as the communications which have numbers, charts, diagrams, and maps as key elements. Unlike photographs and those communications which are called posters here, infographics do not contain the images of the candidates or even people at all. The obvious primary function of infographics is persuasion, not just information. The data and manner of their presentation undergo selection and framing in order to convince the recipients to view the activities or political program of the candidate or his or her opponents in a specific light. At the level of form, these communications resemble typical infographics presented in the media. A good illustration of this type of message is the infographics of Obama's staff showing the dynamics of the work market in the USA (see Fig. 2).

The second Facebook post format which requires some more explanation is the poster. For the purpose of this analysis, photos and pictures which additionally contain a slogan, a catchword, or an appeal were considered as posters. In their form, posters somewhat resemble memes, that is, photos with short captions which virally spread through the Internet. Chart 4 illustrates the prevalence of these forms of communications on the three profiles.

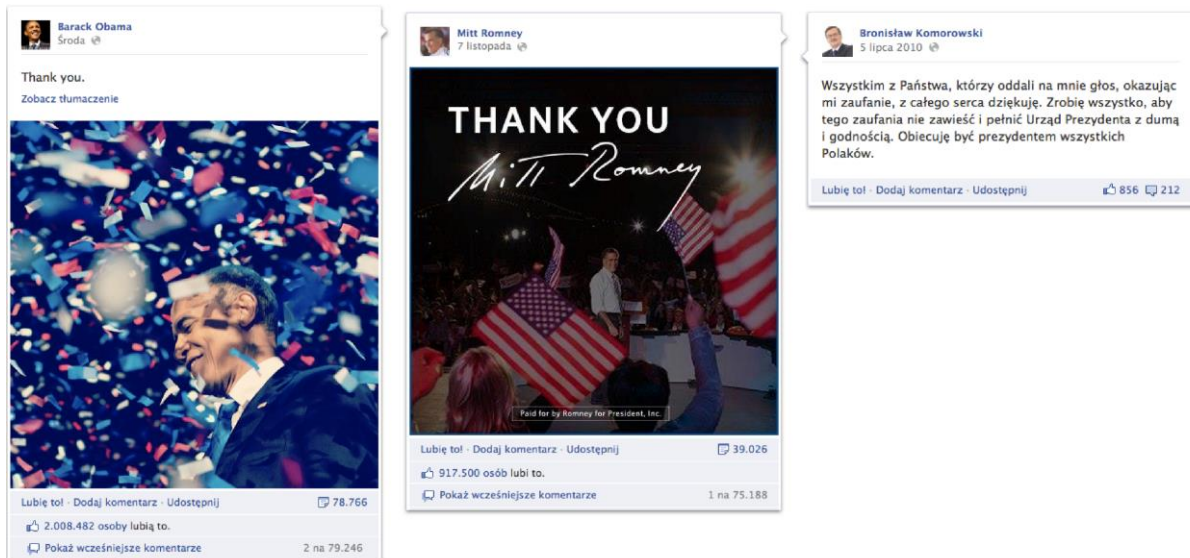


Figure 1. Visual and textual thanks to the voters on Facebook; from the left: Barack Obama, Mitt Romney, Bronisław Komorowski



Figure 2. Typical infographics from electoral campaigns on Facebook; Mitt Romney's on the left, and Barack Obama's on the right

In the case of Obama and Romney, Facebook communication mostly takes place in the form of photos and posters. A lesser proportion of posts belong to videos and infographics.

Links to media and text messages are generally absent from American campaigns. There are certain important points where the form of the Democrat's and the Republican's communications differ. Romney's profile contains almost three times as many infographics and almost twice the number of pictures. Conversely, Obama's staff seems to prefer posters and makes more frequent references to video clips. These differences become less striking once the American messages are compared with the communication with the Civic Platform candidate.

The statistics of the posts on Bronisław Komorowski's profile are almost the direct opposite of the American ones. In Komorowski's case, infographics and posters do not appear. There are very few photos on the profile (two posts), and the only visually significant communications are video materials (17 posts). These video clips are mostly ads, which have been broadcast in the television as well, but also short communications, shot in witness format, mostly with celebrities, in which they explain why they have supported the candidate and exhort to vote for him. The profile of the Civic Platform candidate is dominated by links (22 posts) and textual information (30 posts).

Summary and conclusions

When drawing general conclusions, one should remember they are based on just three cases. For the reasons listed in the first part of the text, the cases described in this paper seem to be representative at least in the qualitative sense. However, taking into account the quantitative limitations, the conclusions found here should primarily be taken as inspiration for further analyses.

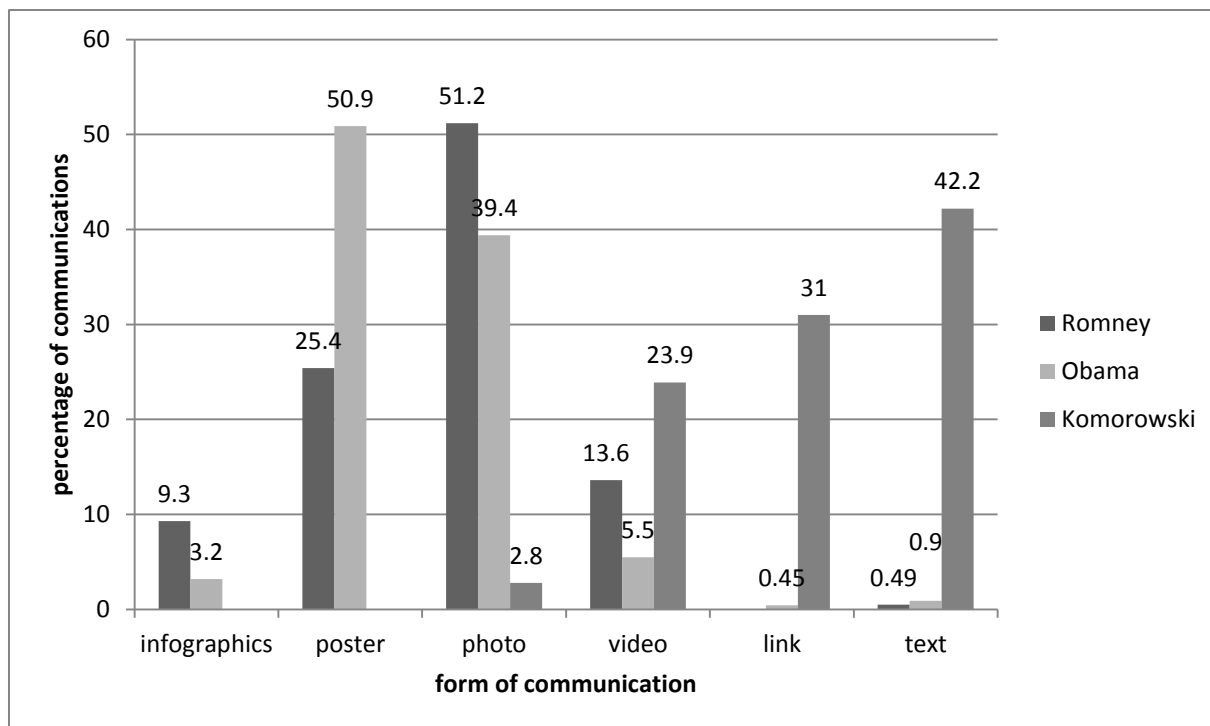


Chart 4. Types of visual communications, percentages

Percentaging bases: Romney, n = 192; Obama, n = 203; Komorowski, n = 71

Source: author's own work

It is possible to advance a number of theses on the basis of the data presented in this text. First, the community website actually does provide the senders of political messages with the tools to mobilise and engage voters. The American candidates greatly benefit from these tools. In this context, the profile of Bronisław Komorowski turns out to be a classic example of using new tools with old methods. The PO candidate's staff clearly had no idea how to exploit this new tool, turning it into a peculiar wall display, dominated by media cutouts (links). This contrast is also evident in the formal layer, which in the case of the Polish candidate seems to openly diverge from the iconic rhetoric favoured by the medium. Taking the above into account, the relatively small number of followers of Komorowski's profile is a result of a certain self-fulfilling prophecy. As the staff did not invest time or energy in the development of this communication tool, the social network constructed around it is small. The recipients do not feel much need to use the profile, as its chief function is to replicate media communications which they receive from elsewhere. Komorowski's staff not only did not realise the mobilisation potential of the medium but also abandoned the more primary function of online media, that is, the ability to share messages not filtered by media gatekeepers.

It would seem that a community website is a medium of positive communication, especially if compared with political TV advertising. Komorowski's profile turned out to be even more positive than its American counterparts.

What is interesting, in comparison with more traditional forms of political communication, Facebook seems to be better suited for the presentation of program content: which, obviously, is reduced to visually enriched catchphrases. It should be remembered, however, that Facebook posts here only play the role of a shop window of a kind, as they encourage to become immersed in the linked more comprehensive program content.

Finally, it has to be said that the Facebook communication of Komorowski's campaign is yet another proof that the availability and the use of new tools and communication channels alone does not lead to the transformation of political communication. Obviously, one could argue that it is just a single case and from relatively long ago. Still, it supports the observations which emerge from other studies into the new media in the Polish political communication. The quantitative studies on electoral campaigns in Poland clearly show that the senders of political messages are unable to effectively exploit the potential of the social media. What is visible, in particular, is the inability to encourage web users to activity²⁹. It seems that one of the key tasks for the research into political communicating in Poland is finding the causes of this state, especially in the context of alarmingly low political activity of citizens and voter turnout.

Yet another issue that needs to be further analysed is the other side of communication. The presented study focuses on how the classically construed senders use the new media. Undoubtedly, a full evaluation of the scale and scope of the transformation of political communication through the new media necessitates the examination if the recipients actually are more involved, empowered, and active in the political communication process.

²⁹ Cf. e.g. the conclusions of the studies on the parliamentary campaign in 2011 and the local elections in 2010, carried out by Dominik Batorski and his team; see: D. Batorski, *Internet w kampanii wyborczej...*, op. cit.; or D. Batorski, J.M. Zając, *Kampania w sieci...*, op. cit.