EUROPE 09.05.2019 | Georgii Pocheptsov

A new style of politics

How social media creates politicians' images and influences elections: the case of Volodymyr Zelenskiy

Read this article in Russian.

The world ceased being a physical space a long time ago — nowadays, for the most part, it's information space and virtual space. This includes religion and ideology, literature and art, cinema and television. The latter has become increasingly widespread and thus constantly demonstrates the advantages of visual over verbal communication, not just because of its simplicity but also because of its entertainment value. People have to be 'forced' into ideology, whereas they are eager to engage in entertainment, particularly social media, and are happy to spend all their free time on it.

The old style of politics, built on ideology, was the politics of 'daily routine'. To be accepted, it had to be monitored from outside (hence the compulsory subscriptions to newspapers during the Soviet era, for instance). Today's politics, however, is a politics of 'free time', monitored from within, by the individual themselves. The old way of doing politics was based on external censorship. The censor divided messages into true and false, and the latter were forbidden from being disseminated. In today's world of politics, the individual is the notional 'censor'. It's now the individual who decides which messages should be accepted as true and which should be rejected as false.

Modern politics adopts any available instrument that has proven its effectiveness in other spheres. Microtargeting, an approach originating in the business world, for instance, has played an active role in several American presidential campaigns, particularly Trump's.

Thanks to their unique features, which enable them to fundamentally change a politician's communication with the electorate, social networks have transformed politics, transporting it into a whole range of new technology-driven activities. Here, we can distinguish several important characteristics: Rapid and immediate access to any big audience; the ability to link 'foreign' communication into the politician's personal

system of communication with the electorate; and the opportunity to use the voters themselves to disseminate new messages. This latter point turned out to be particularly important for negative and fake news, which seemed to spread far more easily than positive messages. In addition, communication is lent the impression of being up-to-date, balanced, and controlled by the voters themselves, who believe they have a say in this new system.

The active audience

We are seeing the emergence of a new phenomenon: that of the active audience. Prior to this, politicians' constituents were passive addressees. Social networks 'tame' politicians since both the campaign creators and the users themselves disseminate the characteristics of the candidate which they deem important. The electorate have the sense that they are free and are not being put under pressure from television programmes and campaign billboards along the edge of the road.

Social media have made it possible to personally identify those who are of interest for a campaign, to find out what different groups of voters want to hear, what might compel them to vote or mobilise their support in some way. Here, analysts refer to the significant advantages politicians never had until social media entered the equation: Opportunities to react immediately (to Donald Trump's tweets, for example), the ability of politicians to make vague promises and hide behind their accusations given that it's the candidates who manage the informational situation.

To some degree, all this defines the same paradigm shift that resulted from the election of numerous populists around the world: from Trump to Orban.

Social media have emerged as closest to the electorate. They give voters a sense, albeit a false one, that they are the ones who are in control. This is because social media gives the impression of privacy, the sense that individuals have their own voice, which they can use to make others hear them.

For those active in social media, a politician's image needs to have different characteristics. To them it is more important for a candidate to be cool than have a respectable appearance and spend their time cutting ribbons at opening ceremonies — events like this are of no interest at all and are simply ignored, despite the fact that television is stuck in the old habit of actively publicising them.

The Ukrainian presidential elections

A prime example of the influence of social networks on the electorate is the recent election runoff between Volodymyr Zelenskiy and Petro Poroshenko in the 2019 Ukrainian presidential elections. Two quotes from Zelenskiy's chief digital strategist, Mikhail Fedorov are particularly enlightening here: 'We segment people according to a large number of criteria … We endeavour to provide each of these segments with a clear message… Every three minutes, I receive a report on how many times we have been mentioned, who is mentioning us, in what tone — negative, positive, specific sources'.

Zelenskiy's supporters were mobilised to go out and vote, which is not a particularly easy task when it comes to young people. The voter turnout among young Ukrainians in the 2019 presidential elections was unprecedented. Coupled with this, there were a lot of gaps in Zelenskiy's image, which everyone filled in as they saw fit. If the electorate had had a clear perception of the incumbent president Poroshenko with all his positive and negative characteristics, then the gaps in Zelenskiy's image may only have been notionally filled.

Poroshenko's and Zelenskiy's images were polar opposites. Poroshenko had many years of experience as a civil servant and as President of Ukraine, Zelenskiy had absolutely no public service experience at all. However, the majority of voters wanted to see the back of the politicians from the past who they blamed for the deterioration in the country's economic circumstances. To a great extent, Zelenskiy's vote represented a rejection of previous economic and political approaches.

To some degree, all this defines the same paradigm shift that resulted from the election of numerous populists around the world: from Trump to Orban. Even the campaign's emphasis on the 'enemy' was of relevance here: Trump had Clinton, Orban had Soros, and Zelenskiy had Poroshenko. At the same time, this way of creating a clear image of the 'enemy' allows the candidate himself to hide in the shadows, becoming nothing more than the antithesis of his opponent.

The candidate's headquarters had to decide which channel would be the most effective way of attracting supporters for their candidate. For Poroshenko, with his presidential image, television was the most suitable. Zelenskiy, on the other hand, had nowhere near the same possibilities as the incumbent president, even in theory. However, Zelenskiy's positioning as the young people's representative meant that he didn't need to make any additional television appearances, not least because, even on election day or the 'day of silence' (the day before the election

where electioneering was forbidden), Zelenskiy was on the '1+1' channel and appeared in the comedy program 'Kvartal 95', as well as in 'Servant of the People', the show in which he plays the president. He simply did not need any additional media promotion.

Social networks have become an active component of the election campaign context in modern societies, and, in several cases a decisive game-changer.

His strategy was to capitalise on his image as a famous personality, which had the potential to work in his favour (but may have also worked against him), when the electorate went to the polls. Facebook, like the spread of a virus, made millions of people almost instantaneously discover a post. It's often the case that the Facebook post becomes the trigger, the button that activates a reaction from the traditional media.

How will this play out?

In light of the growing influence of social media on elections, what changes can we expect in future?

First, in social media, we will see an increase in emotionality compared to rationality; rationalism will remain an instrument of the traditional approach.

Second, if the whole social media palette is exploited: Instagram and Snapshot will more accurately reflect the reaction of the average person on the street, which will always be closer to the conventional users, as compared to the opinion of the political professionals. In Ukraine, for example, Facebook became the stage for the battle to win over middle-aged citizens. Young people, on the other hand, increasingly moved over to Instagram (already 33.5 per cent of the population), lured by Zelenskiy. His personal Instagram page has 3.7 million followers and his professional page, 'Zhe! Komandii', also almost 450,000. Zelenskiy actively posts videos of his morning physical exercise, many people joke and make comments on the progress of the presidential campaign. Poroshenko has slightly over 260 thousand followers on this social networking service.

The principles correspond to both the target group and the marketed image of the candidate. Young people value one thing and the older generation quite another. Trump's experience showed that an individual politician can operate as a whole team on Twitter, since, in this case, the attention of the audience is on the immediate reactions of the candidate. Having said this, there was of course an entire team behind Trump's

Twitter activities and it was less about disseminating information than controlling the news cycle. Nevertheless, it allowed us to identify this new type of presidency, created on Twitter. In Trump's case, the social network automatically shifted from being part of the pre-election toolkit to part of the presidential one. This is a new phenomenon, when the presidency defines itself via a dominant instrument of communication the presidency itself is defined.

Third, websites backing politicians will appear immediately after one set of elections in preparation for the next set — it's important for politicians to recognise that they need to 'develop' their supporters base in advance.

Fourth, the reason we have seen an increase in the negative content of election campaigns is that dirty politics can emerge from any third-party site, and because specifically fake news, which appears negative, can be distributed more effectively by users.

Fifth, communication with the population will be conducted via niche sites, created under all the candidate's main social groups.

Social networks have become an active component of the election campaign context in modern societies, and, in several cases a decisive game-changer. If you play by the rules, you might win, or you might lose. But it's also possible to make up your own rules, which today enables people to utilise social media as a key election tool. This is due to the flexible nature of this form of media, which allows 'weaker' players to participate on a level playing field with 'stronger' ones, something that was not the case with the traditional mass media.



Georgii Pocheptsov
Mariupol

Georgii Pocheptsov is Professor of the Department of Social Communications of Mariupol State University. He's the author of several dozen books on informational and psychological wars, communication theory, futurology, including *Propaganda 2.0* (2018) and *Managing the*

Future (2019).