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Opportunities for a New Type of Dialogue with the Organisation's Publics: A Case Study on How Political Parties Are Adapting in the Basque Country

Ainara Larrondo and Irati Agirreazkuenaga

Abstract

The organisational websites and second-generation web-based technologies like social media have led organisations to alter their activities and strategies both internally and externally. This marriage between Internet and organisations is especially relevant in the case of political organisations like parties. Politics in our society is basically media politics, based on socialised communication and the capacity to influence people's opinions. Online communication has had a direct influence on the parties' publics and the relations with them: on one side, the citizens, and on the other, the mass media and journalists. While top-down adaptations by organisations generally prove more costly or are even non-existent, what we are witnessing is a horizontal type of adaptation [2]. This gives the political class and press offices the opportunity to descend to 'street level' using the tools provided by the web, as well as to become direct communicators that replace the media's traditional work of interpretation. In this context, this chapter offers results from a study (EHUA13/10) centred on understanding how political parties have adapted their communication strategies to meet the challenges of the multimedia paradigm. For that purpose, it focuses on a concrete case and on political parties with representation in the Basque autonomous parliament.

Keywords: politics, parties, organisational website, social media, dialogue, publics

1. Introduction

Nowadays, everything is 2.0, although it appears that this expression is becoming obsolete and everything suggests that it will fall into disuse, as happened with other multipurpose terms. Unlike the first generation of the web (1.0) characterised by the development of websites where it was possible to access information, but where setting up direct interaction with,

and between, users was difficult—websites 2.0 are characterised by their encouragement of interactivity at all levels [1]. The idea of web 2.0 began to spread from the year 2004 onwards, in order to distinguish a second generation of Internet, characterised by more dynamic and interactive applications, as well as by greater dialogue between senders and users, and between Users [2]. The term, coined by Tim O'Reilly [3], refers to a series of applications and Internet sites that use collective intelligence to provide online, interactive services while enabling users to control their data, which is why it is also known as the "social web".

The so-called social media are thus a characteristic feature of web 2.0. Social media are defined in counter-position to the traditional "mass media". While the latter were concentrated in the hands of senders who transmitted unidirectional content to the broad public, social media are defined thanks to the actions of citizen-users, who are simultaneously creators and consumers of content ("prosumers"), giving rise to multidirectional models. "Social media" are therefore a fairly broad concept that covers different tools and services. Concretely, it covers all those websites, platforms, media and Internet services that are characterised by a high level of interactivity, as they enable users to collaborate, interact, converse and, in general, participate in creating, sharing and spreading all types of content. Weblogs, RSS readers or aggregators, news filtering, social markers, social media, wikis, microblogging and geo applications, amongst others, all form part of web 2.0 [4, 5].

The present time is an excellent moment for studying organisations and, in particular, everything related to their communication actions, due to the drive that these latter have acquired in the Internet field. Similarly, it is an ideal moment for the specific analysis of the online communication of political organisations. It is no surprise that this is increasingly centred on integral proposals, far removed from the classic electoral communication aimed at winning votes. In this sense, although studies on the digital activity of political organisations are usually restricted to specific moments of an electoral type [6], there is an increasing tendency for parties to undertake a type of "permanent campaign" [7]. In this state of affairs, as experts point out, effectiveness in communication depends, to a great extent, on the synergies established among the contents of the different messages and even on the use of novel narrative strategies such as transmedia storytelling [8].

From the research point of view, interest in the confluence of communication and technology in organisations has pivoted around online mediated communication and its use. While there is no shortage of intellectual production, preferential attention has been paid to two main problems: on one side, the progressive use of online mediated communication as a replacement for direct communication; and, on the other, the use and preference for some media over others [9].

In recent years, there has been an increase in analyses focusing on the development of new models of communication, relation and, in general, interactivity between organisations, communication media and citizens. This is also true of the political field, where there is still uncertainty concerning the true scope of so-called politics 2.0. Concretely, its real effects on mobilising the electorate have yet to be demonstrated. Nor is it clear that political leaders are using the resources of social media to interact and dialogue with citizens [10].

This idea matches Gruning and Hunt's definition of organisational communication as a behavioural science concerned with guiding the activity of organisations in their relations with the "social setting". This description highlights the imbalances that usually arise in the relation of organisations with their publics [11]. One possible solution is the symmetric, bidirectional model, based on reconciling the organisation's interests with those of the community.

This can be achieved by establishing channels of communication and dialogue with the organisation's publics that facilitate the latter's participation in the organisation. The open and bidirectional communication model, defended by Gruning and Hunt for external organisational communication, fits in with the vision that political parties currently hold of web activity. They define this as a dialogue, although the empirical evidence does not always support this somewhat self-satisfied view.

The development of new technologies and, very particularly, the spread of social network platforms, or platforms 2.0 (blogs, social media, microblogging…) have brought several challenges for all organisations and their members. This has given rise to fears and uncertainty. In the concrete case that interests us, political organisations, it is worth specifying, amongst all the possible causes of such reticence, the changes that web 2.0 is generating in the traditional paradigm of politics and democracy, and in the type of control and power with respect to public opinion and communication [12].

Platforms 2.0 complement the mediating function traditionally played by the classic mass media, especially the press, thanks to the encouragement of new focal points of public opinion. Relations on web 2.0 are bidirectional or multidirectional and enable the exchange of content in any media format (text, image, audio, video, graphics, etc.) This facilitates new forms of horizontal communication that generate multiple types of public discussion. In this sense, the question of who is in control is one of the main differences between social media and offline media. In offline media, each actor has and knows her or his role; in social media, it is the citizens who are the protagonists and organisations tend to adopt their role to be able to communicate, which is something that does not happen in the offline field [13].

Aside from the mere technological evolution involved in the web, the change in organisational communication is important because it is linked to the ideas of vertiginosity, cognitive overabundance and "hypercomplexity" that characterise the Information and Knowledge Society [14]. In this society, control of communication has become a decisive element, while individual success or failure increasingly depends on having the skill to communicate adequately.

2. Communication changes in politics: the new relation with the organisation's publics

The context of change generated by Internet is having an impact on organisations and their normal procedures for relating to, and communicating with, their publics. Organisational communication refers to all the communication resources available to an organisation to

reach its publics efficiently [15, 16]. In this respect, the organisation must adapt to new options or resources that facilitate its communication task, amongst which multimedia and web 2.0 resources stand out due to their impact, scope and novelty. They have given rise to a new paradigm, based on interactive models, that is changing the mode of managing organisations and their communication strategy. These models give special relevance to the public and relegate to a secondary position the traditional prominence of mass media and journalists, who were traditionally addressed by organisations and their press offices.

The image of the press office—and thus of the organisation it represents—facing the mass media results from the way in which personal relations with journalists are managed. But these relations now increasingly involve other publics due to the organisation's participation in social media and its way of communicating, dialoguing and responding on these media. In other words, communication no longer only affects the organisation's image in relation to media and journalists, but also in relation to the general public, made up of the citizens who are increasingly active participants in the media. This means that organisations should dialogue with them, taking into account their views and opinions. Apart from being prepared to listen, a key aspect to consider is that the web is a particular environment that converses in a particular tone of voice, which implies specific communication strategies. One of the main challenges of the web is the weakening of the media boundaries and the sensation of being in a space that is constantly being shaped and adapted.

The shift of the traditional leading role from the medium to the journalist is highly significant in the field of organisational communication, due to the traditional relations between journalists and press offices [17]. Applied to the field that concerns us, political communication, the relation of the party with the media has often been limited to providing information to political journalists through press conferences, interviews or press statements. In this context, the party acts as a social actor that tries to integrate itself into a "media opportunity structure" [18] to achieve public visibility that will further the creation of its own image, which influences the formation of the party preferences of voters [19]. As certain studies show, increased interaction is resulting in a growth in the perception of effectiveness and trust in politicians [20].

In their turn, the citizens also seem to have replaced the media and journalists as the reference of the communication department. In this respect, it should be borne in mind that society no longer informs itself solely by means of what the traditional media say—or at least one sector of society, who are also known as digital natives and characterised by their high presence on web 2.0.

In this way, although organisational communication traditionally addressed publics in a unidirectional and centralised way, the dynamic of the web and social media demands bidirectionality, transparency and an acceptance that activity in the digital setting must have continuity and show a real, not feigned, interest. This is especially significant in the case of organisations like political parties. The web has increased the value of known communication processes by virtue of new tools for transmitting information, relating to journalists and reaching an active and critical citizenry, and this evolution is proving especially important in the case of parties, which not only have an ideology but also an organisation and a communication strategy.

Social platforms have become communities and, increasingly, organisations capable of setting an agenda, since they have contributed in a decisive way to changing the meaning of ideological projects. The 15-M movement in Spain is one example of this tendency involving the formation of citizens' groups and mobilisations that have a growing political repercussion. This is a consciousness of citizenship that has grown in parallel to the deterioration of trust in political parties and the loss of pluralism [21].

3. Challenges in managing organisational communication on Internet: the online press office

Communication management must be understood as a managerial function within the organisation, as it is only in this way that it can be faced in a strategic way. However, in many organisations, the communication department or press office is situated in a "no man's land" between marketing, publicity, human resources, etc. In any case, this department or office should have a transversal character and work in collaboration with other departments of the organisation [22].

Within an organisation's structure, the communication department is thus differentiated due to its functions: the planning, implementation and evaluation of the organisation's communication [23]. This organisational communication is aimed at achieving a certain esteem or "desired perception" [15], understood as a set of attributes that the organisation wants its internal and external publics to associate with it. This identity is also constructed or is influenced by the image that its publics receive and by the way they relate to the organisation.

In this sense, the digital information ecosystem requires increasingly committed press offices that are capable of taking on part of the work that the mass media had been doing up until now, above all in the case of organisations and institutions. To this end, organisations and their press offices or communication departments have achieved a much more horizontal or direct relationship with their publics thanks to organisational websites and, above all, their presence on the main social media platforms (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, etc.)

The evolution of social structures and dynamics has thus contributed to making the art of communicating in the organisational field an increasingly systematic and organised task, aimed at attaining specific goals in three main areas: the relation with the media; the relation with the community; and crisis communication. The expansion of Internet and web 2.0 has had an impact on these three fields and has meant that the planning and management activity done by communication departments has acquired new interest for researchers.

It is therefore possible to speak of a progressive evolution. In fact, in the last two decades, the press office of organisations has passed through different phases of development marked by a strategy with specific actions for the web medium. These phases demonstrate that there has been a qualitative evolution in the consideration of the press office as a source of information, on the one hand, and in its direct relation with both journalists and citizens in general, on the other.

In the concrete case of the organisations that concern us, political parties, these and their main leaders threw themselves into opening digital windows almost as quickly as the most advanced institutions, businesses and Internet users [24] in the mid and late 1990s. During electoral campaigns, parties started to create websites in support of their candidates and some, like the vice-president of the United States, Al Gore, even included debating spaces like forums and live chats in 1994. Before the emergence of web 2.0, around 2002, some strategies were already being developed to take politicians closer to citizens using the Internet. The spread of the blogging phenomenon played a very important role in this respect [23].

In spite of that, the websites of parties and candidates in the 1990s were merely websites with static content. Political groups understood that their presence on Internet was a way of projecting a technologically advanced image. They were more interested in generally appearing to promote the new technologies than in really exploring the new expressive and transformative possibilities that the web gave them. In this first stage of online activity, a basic goal was to have a presence on Internet, like a mere display window for the organisation. In the second stage, dating from the start of the new century, the online press office advances qualitatively and discovers the advantages of online publishing—agility in managing information, multimedia character, unlimited capacity for memory and for linking news items with options for dialogue and relating with the public, etc. In this stage, an active presence on Internet becomes one of the formulas preferred by the communication departments thanks to the incorporation of innovative resources, like Virtual Press Offices (VPOs) and multimedia sections that were perfected over the course of the decade [25]. These VPOs function as independent sections within the corporate website, from where it is possible to access high quality images, videos and short audios, the file of press statements, etc.

The third and final stage began about one decade ago. In this phase, although websites continue functioning as a key tool for image and corporate communication [17, 26, 27], the press office joins the upheaval generated by the spread of web 2.0 and positions itself on the platforms with most social impact. Websites thus cease to be an isolated and marginal instrument for electoral intervention and become part of the multimedia dynamic. Currently, the messages of parties and their candidates are spread and complemented with diffusion and feedback on other digital channels, which in turn are combined with journalistic media and classic audio-visuals.

In short, there is no doubt that social media platforms modify the organisational realm and require that organisational strategy be adapted to a changing environment. Disturbances of communication have become the norm and should not be interpreted as an inconvenience, as they might entail enormous strategic innovative potential that must be allowed to unfold [28].

4. Methodology

In the present context described above, marked by the advance of the web and changes in communication processes, this paper analyses the way in which political organisations are dealing with digital activity and how this is being received by the media, journalists and citizens. This perspective argues that the new technologies have not only altered the professional

definition of what is "political", but also the definition of the department or office within political organisations that is responsible for managing and defining communication strategy. As suggested above, this strategy is centred on techno-political practices outside the specific moments of electoral campaigns and on developing an online public space. This communication aims to encourage reflection on these changes and challenges by providing a synthesis of some partial results of a research study focusing on the main organisations of the Basque Autonomous Community [29].

The study used a sample based on five political parties with parliamentary representation in the Basque Country: the Basque Nationalist Party (*Euskal Alderdi Jeltzalea-Partido Nacionalista Vasco*—EAJ-PNV), Basque Country Unite (*Euskal Herria Bildu*—EH Bildu), the Basque Popular Party (*Partido Popular Vasco*-Euskal Talde Popularra—PP), the Socialist Party of the Basque Country/Basque Left (*Partido Socialista de Euskadi-Euskadiko Ezkerra*—PSE-EE/PSOE), and Union, Progress and Democracy (*Unión Progreso y Democracia*—UPyD). The study was carried out between 2013 and 2015 and employed different techniques (analysis of organisational websites and political blogs, in-depth interviews with managers in charge of organisational communication and mass media, and focus groups with young university students). Concretely, the research study summarised in this paper had two main goals:

1. To describe how political organisations in the Basque Country have adapted to the digital scenario, according to their communication strategy on different online media (websites and platforms 2.0: RSS, microblogs, social media and networks, blogs, etc.)

2. To gain a deeper understanding of the way this online activity has affected the relation with publics, bearing in mind that this relation is one of the main pillars of democratic functioning. In this respect, the study specifically sought to understand:

a. The main difficulties and advantages encountered by these organisations in their use of virtual platforms to communicate more directly and efficiently with their publics: the mass media and the citizens.

b. How the principal mass media in the Basque Autonomous Community view the effectiveness of the communication and dialogue actions carried out by parties via the web, with both citizens and journalists.

c. To understand the vision and opinion of young Basques about the online political practices and the dialogue of the organisation with its main publics.

5. Results

The communication managers interviewed stated that it was advisable to have professionals in their departments or press offices who were capable of responding both strategically and on a day-to-day basis to the demands of this field. This is because, beyond its novelty and attractiveness, it can serve as an authentic meeting place with citizens and society. In spite of that,

they believe it is advisable not to lose sight of the fact that web 2.0, although it is very much in vogue, is an additional and complementary element within the organisation's communication.

The presence and virtual positioning of political parties through the organisational website have meant an evolutionary process, involving improvement and continuous exploitation of the advances brought by Internet over the years (audio-visualisation, unlimited space for deepening content, speed, interactivity, etc.). At the same time, the department's work on web 2.0 has involved a challenge that, although expected and foreseen, has forced it to react much more rapidly.

Management of the website is totally internalised in all the parties considered in the study. According to the results of the content analysis, in terms of visibility and popularity, there was a clear need for the parties analysed to carry out actions to improve their positioning on the web. Although they have well-structured websites with a large quantity of interesting information, they must dedicate more attention to specific strategies for developing search engine optimisers (SEO). It is possible to note a slight tendency to prioritise interactive practices (32.46%), which come before options with a traditional character, like mobilising the electorate (25.32%), communication and information (22.07%) or accessibility (20.12%).

This supremacy of the interactive function is largely due to the momentum of the political parties' presence on social media, a presence that is due to the development of the website itself, from which it is possible to:

a. Access those media through links that appear on all the website pages—although it is on the homepage where they are more prominent.

b. Energise website content—new items, posts, videos, photographs, etc.—on those media.

c. Visualise content spread through the party's social media on the website itself.

On the other hand, besides employing basic and well-known resources, such as traditional email with the press office, direct contact is now also carried out using other channels, such as contact through chat on WhatsApp. Forums are a resource that has now fallen into disuse with Twitter replacing the role of such dialogic spaces, which were characteristic of the first stages of both media and organisational websites.

With respect to the dialogue between parties and media/journalists through web 2.0, it can be said that this is a channel that is little used and undervalued. As the communication departments analysed in the study recognise, the information that is moved on platforms 2.0 reaches journalists directly through traditional channels (email containing the press statement, information on the web, etc.) In those concrete cases where communication is solely launched on social media, it is backed up by a call to the relevant agencies and newsrooms. What interactive tools have achieved is to accelerate the relation between political press offices and journalists, enabling this to become more fluid and swifter, as occurs with invitations to press meetings over WhatsApp, for example.

Facebook is the network that is preferred for the parties' communication strategy, followed by Twitter in some cases and YouTube in others. All the communication departments state

that Google+ is a network of little relevance to their communication function, but that it is important for web positioning. They also share an interest in more novel and cutting edge networks like Instagram and Pinterest. In this respect, Flickr is considered to be a traditional network that continues to carry weight and be of communication interest, above all for some of the parties' activities, such as pre-campaign and campaign activities.

Concerning their strategic presence on different social networks and the use made of them, Facebook stands out as it is considered to be an especially useful platform for interactivity with the broad public, especially the voting public or those close to the party. Twitter, on the other hand, is seen as a more useful network in relation to journalists, bloggers and so-called influencers in general. In this respect, they recognise that in many cases, the social media are employed as a mere complementary platform for re-distributing content already published on the website or in the traditional media, given the real difficulties for generating debate. These difficulties are caused, on the one hand, by the type of functioning of the party itself, which tends to maintain its traditional attitude or role as a sender, rather than as a receiver of what the public is saying or as one side involved in a dialogue. In other cases, the difficulty derives from the use made of social media by the public, which, in some cases, has little interest in, or commitment to, mass debate.

Blogs are seen as the best way of transmitting the personal—rather than institutional—viewpoint of the political leaders in a straightforward way and, in this sense, they are one of the most useful tools for direct contact with citizens, although the majority of the blogs analysed do not allow citizens the option of making comments. They also enable politicians to express themselves on issues where this is not possible in other spaces (speeches in parliament, electoral meetings, public speeches, etc.)

The political parties considered recognise that journalists have not yet acquired the habit of following the party on platforms 2.0 in search of the latest information or scoops, perhaps because to date no clear routines have been established in this respect. Conversely, the general norm is to specifically follow politicians who are known to be very active and who can provide striking headlines for whatever reason, above all due to their capacity for generating controversy. It also seems that some leaders' blogs have a certain following, although this continues to be an exception.

The parties recognise that when they use blogs they try to both strengthen the message distributed through the conventional mass media and increase closeness to the public, supporters, journalists and other bloggers. All the parties agree in recognising that using blogs improves their image, bearing in mind that nowadays the blogosphere continues to be one of the main, deliberative, public spaces in the Internet field.

6. Conclusions and final remarks

The communication activity of the political parties and mass media considered in the research is going through a time of transition. At this point, the results of our case study evidence the particular significance of making clear the objectives that the political party aims to achieve through digital communication, as well as the best ways to integrate these aims with existing

projects. This prevision should also include clarification of which areas require major invest-ment in the short and long run, including a prevision of how this investment will be measured.

One of the key issues in political organisations is public engagement [30] and the coordina-tion of content creation activities for the different platforms, which include the consideration of new professional profiles in the communication or press department. This involves the use of online systems that make it possible to communicate directly with citizens without the traditional mediation of journalists, although their mediation continues to make up the most important part of the work of organisational communication. Amongst the online tools, the organisational website functions as a mechanism for the multiple distribution of content generated by the communication department, while the social media function as a tool for the organisation to spread content and to dialogue with its publics [31, 32].

Interactivity is somewhat underused or subordinated to other goals, such as providing infor-mation with a top-down or vertical style. Although in general the politicians and organisa-tions considered want to hear what citizens have to say, not all of them show a coherent attitude towards web 2.0 philosophy and there is a tendency to "appear to be listening". So much is this the case that use is not even made of the basic potentialities of social platforms, which are capable of providing cohesion to political messages that do not fit in the traditional media. The tendency is to use these platforms as mere channels for syndicating content and information that has already been spread through the more classic channels.

Out of all the networks 2.0 that exist at present, Twitter appears to be the most efficient for gen-erating an exchange of information and opinion based on the triad formed of citizen/users, politicians and journalists. It is not surprising that Twitter should be the paradigm of horizon-tal communication, given its functionalities like freedom of production, absence of editorial control over content or multi-directionality of the flow of messages. It is at the same time a mass medium and a mass-personal communication medium. Moreover, it has proved to be a valuable tool for discovering what is on the minds of citizens at a given moment in time.

Twitter is similar to the traditional word-of-mouth of interpersonal communication. Besides following, responding to and expressing opinions on messages proceeding from political organisations and conventional media, citizens can use Twitter as a vehicle for alternative politics, based on the creation of networks and movements that are ceasing to be marginal and coming to have a growing presence and visibility in society.

The parties recognise that the traditional type of mediated communication (press, radio and television) continues to be basic, even coming before web tools (organisational website and social media). However, these parties also recognise that it is their activity on the web—espe-cially on social networks and Twitter—that on many occasions makes them into a subject of news in the traditional media, above all on television. The citizens still trust the traditional media as the main source of information on politics, parties and elections [33]. Furthermore, there is a significant gap between the expressive potentialities that the new media offer both parties and citizens, and the real use that both make of them.

The political organisations considered in the study recognise that Internet and web 2.0 are indis-pensable nowadays; but so are the traditional media, to which, curiously, they continue to dedi-

cate the greater part of their efforts. In fact, activities on social media often seek visibility and repercussion in the mass media, generally the television. The parties have thus tried to adapt web 2.0 to their needs, rather than changing their *modus operandi* in answer to the cultural norms of the social web, while at the same time, they recognise the limitations and shortcomings of web 1.0.

Acknowledgements

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