Online Negative Campaign
in the 2004 Romanian Presidential Elections[1]

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Abstract. The 2004 electoral campaign marks the beginning of internet use in the political communication in Romania. It has also been the first campaign that resorts to negative communication via online tools. The main actors of this negative campaign, motivated and involved in it by the strategic planners and PR specialists, were the sympathizers of the DA Alliance[2]. Its communication consultants launched an online platform on their candidate's website on which the party members and sympathizers could upload electoral materials. The funnier and more depreciative the electoral materials regarding the Social Democratic Party (SDP) counter-candidate were, the more visible they were online, being sent through email, through visited blogs or viewed on video-sharing websites.

As a space dedicated to the freedom of expression, situated beyond any official (state) censorship, the online environment became the space where the DA Alliance sympathizers got actively involved in its campaign. One of the fundamental reasons was that the prime minister in 2004 (a SDP member) was easy to be mocked at and treated on internet as if he were a peer of the DA Alliance voters. This pseudo-democratization transformed the DA Alliance candidate and its communication strategic planners into winners.

Keywords: communication, electoral, online, marketing, digital guerilla.

1. Marketing warfare

In the already classic book *Marketing Warfare*, Jack Trout and Al Ries (1986: 3-7) showed that the modern marketing does not particularly focus on the market needs, but on the competitors' weaknesses: the economic organization identifies the weak points of the competition and launches attacks upon them, because modern marketing means war.

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[2] DA Alliance is the acronym for Dreptate (Justice) and Adevăr (Truth) Alliance.

We notice that due to the fact that political marketing borrows the techniques and language of the commercial marketing, the electoral campaign means war.

1.1. The negative campaign

The negative political campaign points out the weaknesses of the counter-candidates and makes a mockery out of the threats coming from the counter-candidates. The twisted effect of the negative campaign is that some candidates might benefit from the attacks launched by another candidate.

A negative campaign does not aim at increasing the number of votes, but at enhancing the disorientation of the already disappointed voters. The strategic planners act in order to keep the undecided voters away from the polls and to determine the captive voters to go and vote. So the primary purpose of the negative campaign is to make both the undecided voters, as well as the instable voters become so confused and disgusted that none of these categories choose to participate in the election process. The strategic planners also aim at involving the party members and the candidate's sympathizers in the online campaign of the party in the sense of defending the leader (candidate) and at engaging them in the attacks against the opponents.

The secondary purpose of the negative campaign is to mess up the timing that the rivals planned for their campaign. Once attacked, the counter-candidate is forced to search for answers, so he cannot stick to his initial calendar anymore.

1.2. Rumors in the negative campaign

Rumors launched in the negative campaign play the role of highly persuasive messages. Jean-Noël Kapferer ([1990] 2006: 332-333) claims that any mass persuasion campaign has the effect of reinforcing the individuals' pre-existent beliefs. People subject themselves to the messages in a preferential manner. The simpler the arguments, the easier the message will be comprehended. The redundancy of arguments ensures that the message is memorized. Kapferer believes that, when referring to persuasion, we should rather talk about self-persuasion than about hetero-persuasion. Rumors have to be built according to the target-audience's expectations about a certain political candidate.

The advantage of rumors is that they avoid disclosing the sender's identity. The

source cannot be identified and no one takes responsibility, although everyone is aware of it. "The rumor allows the open debate of subjects that are commonly prohibited by the political tradition" (Kapferer [1990] 2006: 276). The rumor does not need a proof. The public opinion is rather based on impressions than on facts, the accusation being sufficient (Kapferer [1990] 2006: 276-284).

Among the main themes of the rumor, Kapferer mentions the occult power and secret societies, secret agreements, outrageous accumulations or hidden fortunes, the profit obtained by cheating the contributors. One of the themes described by Kapferer ([1990] 2006: 284) is the one of the "double language: the true intentions of the politician are in fact opposite to his public statements". These types of rumors have also been used in the 2004 Romanian presidential campaigns.

1.3. Disinformation

Disinformation is one of the tools used during the negative campaign and it uses distorted information. The distortion caused by *ignorance* appears when the audience either ignores the cause of an event, or it is biased, meaning it is aware only of the causes stated by some of the actors involved in the event. For instance, the Romanians learned about what was presented as a "spontaneous revolution" in Ukraine (Beauvois, Rainaudi 2008:135). But one of the undisclosed causes of the so-called spontaneous street movements was the activity undertaken by the intelligence secret service trained and paid by the USA.

The distortion caused by *weight* is equivalent to the fact that the audience gives more weight to certain facts than to others, basing their judgment on non-rational criteria. The audience is alarmed by the news about bloody murders. Beyond the fear of unemployment and of the economic crisis, the fear for one's own life is the people's main preoccupation. Mass-media do not determine the people's way of thinking, but they indicate what people should be thinking of.

The distortion due to *fake belief* occurs when the audience believes in unreal facts or believes that certain real facts are not real. According to an investigation made by the Maryland University, after the beginning of the Iraq War in 2003, 60% of the USA citizens and 80% of the Fox News viewers had the following fake beliefs (Beauvois, Rainaudi 2008: 137): (1) mass destruction weapons were discovered in Iraq; (2) there is evidence proving the Iraq and Al Qaida alliance; (3) the worldwide public opinion is in favor of the American military intervention in Iraq.

2. Marketing warfare in the online campaigns

The Romanian electoral campaigns orchestrated in the print press and online are not subject to the National Audiovisual Council (CNA) control. The political competitors use the advantage of the internet, namely that the language and the online means of expression are not affected by the CNA censorship. Hence, the negative campaign during the Romanian presidential elections takes place mostly on the internet. The electoral war, the attacks against opponents, insult, defamation, calumny, rumors and distortion often take place on the internet.

The ex-presidential counselor Mugur Ciuvică is the one who has first used the internet as a political marketing tool in Romania by transforming Armagheddon II – a report about the fortune and business of Adrian Năstase, the Romanian prime minister and candidate at the 2004 presidential elections – into the first *viral* political document (Tudor 2008: 144).

PR specialists who work for the candidates hire teams having the mission to take care of forums, blogs, websites and post comments, opinions, insults, calumnies, according to the interests of their employers (*Ibidem*).

2.1 Negative campaign techniques

Our research proposes an inventory of the negative campaign techniques used by the campaign teams in the 2004 Romanian presidential elections. Most of these techniques were used in integrated campaigns. The political messages were sent through drop mail flyers, street sampling flyers, print ads, and also online, via direct mailing, spam, viral videoclips, online games and so on. The authors of the following materials are unknown, as well as their circulation:

a) "poisoned" flyers[3]:

a.1) the flyer entitled "Coaliţia pentru un parlament curat"/ "Coalition for a Clean Parliament, a guide for choosing the parliamentarians" was disseminated via drop mail in Bucharest. It was an informative bulletin apparently signed by symbolic civil society members (Mircea Toma from the Monitoring Agency, Cristian Pîrvulescu from the Pro Democracy Association, Ioana Avădani from the Independent Journalism Center etc.) The flyer presented Traian Băsescu, candidate of the DA Alliance, as a collaborator of the Romanian Political Police Service (Securitate). Călin Popescu-Tăriceanu, the liberal assigned to be the future prime minister by the DA Alliance, was displayed as a luxury cars importer exempt by the customs duties by a Government Decree signed by himself while he was a Minister.

a.2) another flyer named "Băsescu wants to make homosexuality legal" was disseminated in Constanţa – the city where Băsescu was born:

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[3] The source of the negative campaign materials, such as the flyer above, is not mentioned, so the printing house and circulation remain unknown.

b) a postcard named "Băsescu Violatorul!"/"Băsescu, the Rapist!" claimed that the DA Alliance candidate had raped a woman in 1973 and threatened he would kill her, while he was a student at the Marine Institute in Constanța:

c) an online letter, faking that it came from Congo, circulated on the internet in 2004. It ended with a poetry attacking DA Alliance counter-candidate, the PSD candidate Adrian Năstase nicknamed "Bombo": "And if boughs knock on the window/And you count again on Bombo/I'll hang myself on the first bough/And get buried in Congo" (Tudor 2008: 137). The letter was transformed into a short text message and was soon disseminated on numerous mobile phones.

d) short text messages (SMS):

d.1) the DA Alliance SMS sent against Adrian Năstase a few days before the vote: "And if boughs knock on the window and you vote Bombo, I *** on the entire country and emigrate in Congo". The campaign aiming to discourage the Social Democratic Party voters, to change their mind, to induce them a feeling of collective guilt and embarrassment for voting SDP used these SMS messages on the mobile phones.

d.2) SDP sent a SMS reply against Traian Băsescu: "And if the heavy clouds are gone and you still vote with the Democratic Party, you'll *** the ***, because SDP will win anyhow!"

For observers such as Sorin Tudor (2008:139), "mobile telephony is more than a technology; it is a social phenomenon in full expansion". A SMS is cheaper than phone calls and much cheaper than door-to-door campaign. Short messaging is used

to motivate the electors on the voting day (even if undertaking political campaign/communication during the voting day is illegal), to convey details regarding the political party organization, to announce newsflashes, and to solve crisis situations. The disadvantage of the SMS is that it is more expensive than email messages.

2.2. Digital Guerilla

The idea to use the internet as part of a Romanian electoral strategy belongs to Felix Tătaru, the manager of GMP advertising agency. Internet was used in 2004 for Traian Băsescu's presidential campaign taking all the advantages of the web 2.0 era. Dorina Guțu (2007:167) thinks that Traian Băsescu is the first Romanian politician to exploit the internet potential as a means of political communication.

Felix Tătaru introduced the section entitled *Digital Guerilla*[4] on the campaign website, www.basescu.ro. Visitors could upload and download electoral communication materials and other pamphlet materials (such as caricatures), and the website owners specified they did not take responsibility for the content posted by the fans on the site, thus "the internet transformed the electoral campaign in a national laughter" (Tudor 2008:150).

Digital Guerilla was the first online communication platform to incorporate a negative campaign. The DA Alliance members and supporters used the online environment to mock at SDP and its candidate, Adrian Năstase, and to stir young people's interest in the presidential campaign through the following guerilla actions:

a) forums, online discussion groups (such as Yahoo Groups) to mobilize people to vote for Traian Băsescu;

b) fake email warning messages about alleged frauds at the poll;

c) virus applications that breached the computer of the voters and displayed political messages:

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[4] Since 2004 Digital Guerilla has turned into a characteristic of the Romanian online electoral communication.
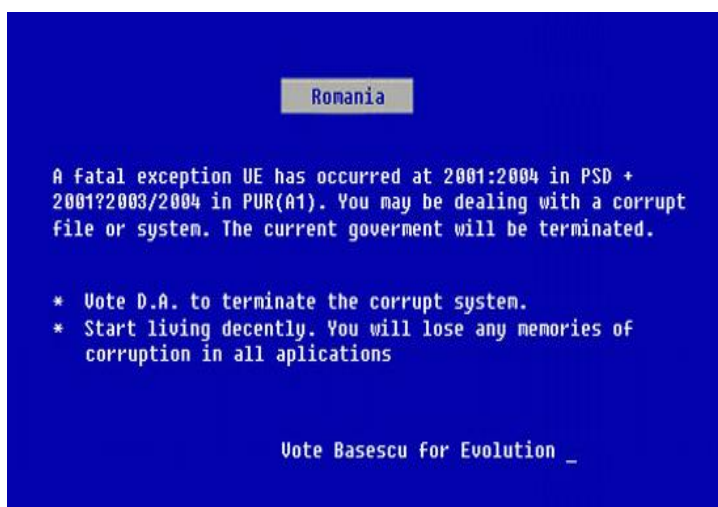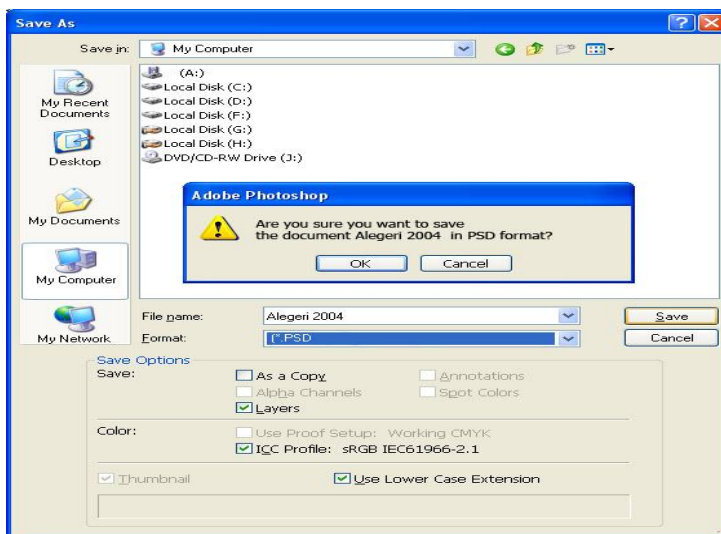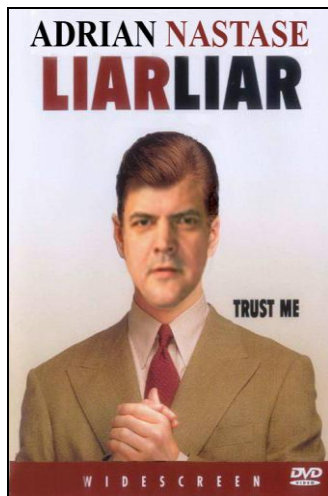
d) photos[5], caricatures and games shared through mass-messages (i.e., via Yahoo Messenger) to ridicule the counter-candidates.

Digital Guerilla against Adrian Năstase:

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[5] The hereby pictures do not have a known author; they have been created by anonymous online users.

With a well placed vote,
nothing is impossible!

Digital Guerilla supporting Traian Băsescu:

Vote with your head,
not with your butt!

e) User Generated Content websites (YouTube.com, Trilulilu.ro) where users could upload and disseminate parody video-clips through the process of video-sharing;

f) viral marketing, through which the uploaded video clips became viral by being shared with their readers by the most important bloggers.

3. Conclusions

Although there are no studies that assess the extent in which the undecided voters are mobilized to go to the poll or in which the voters who are loyal to a certain candidate are demobilized and do not go to the poll, the initiators of the digital guerilla concept are the same ones who won the presidential elections in Romania in 2009.

Traian Băsescu did not significantly update his campaign website after 2004. He re-used it temporarily in 2007, in the campaign for the referendum when the Romanians had to vote for or against the President, and then in the 2009 presidential elections. Although Băsescu is the first Romanian politician that understands how powerful internet is and its ability to reach certain population segments, he is not among the politicians who have a blog – as opposed to his 2004 counter-candidate, Adrian Năstase, who is one of the most prolific Romanian blogger-politicians. Băsescu's Facebook page hosts only the news from the website of the Presidential Administration.

We should note that after the 2004 campaign, the most used negative campaign techniques are the ones specific for web 2.0. While the official campaign website or the blog are positive campaign tools, the User Generated Content websites (Youtube.com, Trilulilu.ro) and the online social networks constitute the virtual spaces where the negative campaign is built.

In 2004 the best known uses of internet for online political communication were the email, the discussion groups (such as Yahoo Groups or forums), website browsing in search of information, file transfer, video-sharing website, whereas in the 2009 campaign it was not the political blog, but the video-sharing, podcasting websites and especially the online social networks that were the most used platforms for online political communication and particularly for the online negative campaign.

The hard work beyond an online negative campaign is not conducted by the strategic planner or the PR team, especially as the rumors that emerge online are never admitted by the source/sender. Even if the politician or consultant may draw the attack or defamation directions, an online campaign is turned into a successful one by the party members and, moreover, by the party/candidate sympathizers.

Particularly in the negative campaign, the ones who upload pamphlet web banners, caricatures, online games and viruses, the ones making fun of the politicians are the internet users. They are the ones who discover a politician's *faux pas* in the traditional (or even live) mass-media and upload it on the social networking or

video-sharing websites, making it viral. The online negative communication belongs, in fact, to the online audience. The marketing warfare transforms voters into guerilla fighters through online communication. The winners are eventually the politicians.

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