GISELA GONÇALVES & J. PAULO SERRA
UNIVERSITY OF BEIRA INTERIOR | LABCOM (PORTUGAL)

ONLINE RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT AND DIGITAL PARTICIPATION IN THE POLITICAL SPHERE: A COMMUNICATIVE MYTH?

Abstract

Grounded in relationship management and political public relations theory, this study takes a critical look at politician-citizen online relationship building in non-electoral periods. Using the example of Portuguese political parties as a case study, participatory tools available on parties' websites, the interactive exchange observed and interviews with political communication managers are analysed to reflect on the Internet's potential for heightening citizen participation. Main results indicate that providing information is a predominant function over promoting interaction and that political parties offer online spaces for citizens to discuss and debate online but hardly join the conversation.

INTRODUCTION

Online media, especially since the emergence of Web 2.0, has brought with it an overall change in the political sphere, with high hopes for democratic renewal and improvement. In the current "media ecology" (Scolari, 2012), the Internet has become the cornerstone of political communication strategies. As political parties increasingly adopt new communication technology, they are also gradually providing opportunities for citizen participation and engagement online.

Studying politician-citizen-politician interaction in the online environment is very interesting when considering the theory of relationship management. This theory is that, in order for an organization to be successful, it needs to put effort into establishing and nurturing relationships with its

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publics, balancing mutual interests (Ledingham, 2006, 2011). Research on relationship management in online political public relations is scarce, however, and the research in that field mainly focuses on the role of websites and web-based communication during electoral campaigns (e.g., Levenshus, 2010; Karlsson et al., 2013).

In an attempt to counter this trend, the overall purpose of the present study is to investigate how political parties manage their relationship with citizens, in non-electoral periods, using the example of Portuguese political parties as a case study. Participatory tools (e.g., e-mail, comments, social media) available on parties' websites and the interactive exchange observed will be at the centre of the reflection.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review is divided into two sections, comprising the theoretical context of online political communication and relationship management studies, from a political public relations perspective. Firstly, the study is contextualized within the on going debate about Internet potentialities for strengthening citizens' political and civic participation. Secondly, there is a reflection on how the specific properties in online media relate to certain aspects of relationship management and political public relations.

ONLINE POLITICAL COMMUNICATION, INTERACTION AND CIVIC PARTICIPATION

New media technologies have been analysed in contradictory ways by political communication scholars. Some have looked to online technologies as the solution to the malaises of democracy, allowing for "virtual community" (Rheingold, 1993) and "virtual democracy" (Scheer, 1994). Others saw technology as inherently dangerous to democracy, eroding social capital and community ties (Etzioni & Etzioni, 1999) and reducing the opportunity for collective action and civil debate (Street, 1992).

Research is also divided as it regards who will benefit from the new online environment. Some had argued that smaller political actors would have a greater chance of reaching voters as they have greater difficulty in gaining media access (Norris, 2003). Others, in line with the "normalization thesis", claimed that the bigger actors, the traditional offline players, are more visible on the Web, indicating that resources also affect Internet presence and use of the online resources (Gibson, Margolis, Resnick & Ward, 2003; Gibson & Ward, 2002). Thus, rather than affecting any major

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changes in the rate or quality of democratic participation, the Internet is simply reproducing and thereby reinforcing existing social biases in participation (Margolis & Resnick, 2000).

Despite the contradictory readings on new media and politics, several studies continue to stress the novelty and democratic potentialities of the Internet as a tool for enhancing political trust, pluralism and widening political participation (Norris, 2003; Gibson, Ward & Lusoli, 2003, 2005). As online campaigns are based on interaction, they should reduce citizens' apathy and increase participation (Chadwick, 2006). Dahlgren (2005) also argues that the Internet might contribute to civic interaction by promoting horizontal communication, although the Internet "cannot promise a quick fix for democracy" (p. 151).

Nevertheless, in the study of political parties' websites in the USA and in the UK, Gibson *et al* (2003) found that providing information and generating resources were predominant functions over promoting participation; and that interactivity tended to be top-down, from the parties to the citizens. Schweitzer (2005) also mentioned that all studies about online campaigns emphasized the fact that the majority of political party and candidate websites favoured the informative function over the interactive and participatory functions (online discussions, surveys, online petitions, etc.).

The possibility of online interaction has led to most political communication research. But interaction is not synonymous with political participation. As Carpentier (2011) stressed, participation should not be confused with mere access to the media or to interaction between citizens and political actors. These concepts avoid the issue of power relations, or in Dahlgren's words (2014), "Democratic participation must at some point and in some way actualize power relations, however weak or remote they may seem" (p. 64). Voting embodies political participation and "manifests citizenship" (*ibid.*) but there are other forms of civic participation (e.g. lobbying, debating, petitioning, contacting one's representative). Inspired by Dahlgren, we see in the increasing use of ICT by citizens "a new field of civic practices that lies at the very heart of democracy" (Dahlgren, 2014, p. 65).

It is in this context that we understand the Internet's self-produced media functionality (Croteau, 2006; Howard, 2008) as a participatory mechanism that enables not only media production but also interaction. That is, all the actions performed by citizens using Internet tools, especially Web 2.0 (blogs, YouTube videos with the ability to comment, social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace, Flickr, broadcast e-mails with ability to

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reply, etc.) are actions that allow citizens to create and share political content and get involved in social networks. Simply put, therefore, in this paper the focus will be on the "interactive exchange" (McMillan, 2006, p. 165) that can be observed between two social actors, politicians and citizens (or users).

RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT AND POLITICAL PUBLIC RELATIONS

The online media environment has been at the centre of much of the recent research in public relations. The importance of the two-way communication enabled by online tools has been particularly stressed by relationship management theory. According to Ledingham & Bruning (2000, p. xiii), the seeds for the relationship management approach in PR theory were sown in 1984, in an article authored by Ferguson, who argues that the core of PR is the relationship between an organization and its publics. This perspective was then disseminated through the rapid adoption of a relational definition in well-known PR handbooks like "Effective Public Relations" by Cutlip, Center and Broom (1994, p. 2), which claimed that PR is "the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failures depends". Later on, Ledingham and Bruning (1998) proposed a preliminary definition of the organization-public relationship as "the state that exists between an organization and its key publics in which the actions of either entity impact the economic, social, political and/or cultural well-being of the other entity" (p. 62). Thus, an ideal organization-public relationship would be characterized by mutual positive interdependence.

To better understand this interdependence Ledingham and Bruning (1998) identified five dimensions of organization-public relationships that influence publics' perception of their relationship with an organization: trust, openness, involvement, commitment and investment in the relationship. Moreover, the authors found that better perceptions of these aspects are correlated with more favourable dispositions toward an organization. *Trust* describes the feeling that those in the relationship can rely on each other. *Openness* refers to being engaged in communication in a frank way. *Involvement* means that both the organization and public are committed to furthering each other's interests and thus maintain a long-term relationship. *Investment* "refers to the time, energy, feelings, efforts and other resources given to building the relationship" (p. 58).

Relationship management research had a strong boost due to the Internet's potential to increase dialogic communication between organizations and their publics (Jo & Kim, 2003; Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007; Park

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& Reber, 2008; Bortree & Seltzer, 2009). A strategic framework for creating dialogic relationships with publics through the Internet was provided first by Kent and Taylor (1998). Dialogue is "any negotiated exchange of ideas and opinions" (Kent & Taylor, 1998, p. 325) and represents efforts by those involved in a relationship to participate in an open and honest exchange.

Kent and Taylor (1998) identified five dialogic principles for organizations to use when building relationships through websites. First, organizations should use the Internet to establish a "dialogic loop". In other words, websites should let publics question organizations and, more importantly, give organizations the opportunity to give feedback on their questions, concerns and problems (Kent & Taylor, 1998, p. 326). The dialogic loop could be achieved, for example, by giving readers permission to publish comments and replies to posts by an author on an official blog, and by also allowing the author to reply via forum or e-mail. The second principle focuses on the "usefulness of information": websites should provide general information even when they include messages directed towards more specific publics (which is true, for example, for press rooms). Information about the organization and its history are always valuable to any public, provided that it is reliable. At the same time, offering useful information also achieves "the generation of returns visits", the third dialogic principle. This is why it is important for organizations to update their websites often and make them attractive by including several resources (chat rooms, forums, interviews with specialists, publishing events, frequently-asked questions, space for opinion and discussion, links to social networks, among others).

According to Kent and Taylor (1998), "the intuitiveness/ease of the interface" and "the conservation of visitors" are also fundamental principles of promoting dialogic communication. Any Internet user wants to navigate websites intuitively and easily when looking for information. Balance between graphic and textual elements, easy menus and speed of page loads are, for that very reason, essential. When the aim is creating a relationship, browsing must be perfect to avoid losing visits. It is important to only include interesting links and avoid advertising. After all, an organization can only create a good relationship if Internet users visit the site regularly.

Although the 1998 article predates the participatory tools today available on the Internet, the dialogic principles still seem to be relevant to building and managing relations with key publics. Several studies have made use of Kent and Taylor's framework to analyse blogs (Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007), Facebook pages (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009), Twitter (Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010), and wikis (Hickerson & Thompson, 2009). Generally,

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these studies argue that the dialogic loop should be encouraged, without forgetting to highlight the importance of organizations having public relations teams that monitor and reply quickly to issues raised by publics on online platforms.

The relationship management approach and online dialogic features are highly interesting for political public relations. With the intention of bridging public relations and political communication, (Stromback & Kiousis, 2011), brought the relationship management perspective into the equation, as can be noted in the following definition:

> Political public relations is the management process by which an organization or individual actor for political purposes, through purposeful communication and action, seeks *to influence and to establish, build, and maintain beneficial relationships* [emphasis added] and reputations with its key publics to help support its mission and achieve its goals. (Stromback & Kiousis, 2011, p.8)

Similarly, Ledingham (2011, p. 237) agrees that political public relations and relationship management share a similar perspective, since both underscore the importance of relationships, and notes that they are not only formed through communication but also through action (e.g., lobby activities or political events).

However, in spite of the expansion of relationship management research on the Internet's potential for strengthening relationship efforts, little is known about the Internet's role at a strategic management level in relation to political communication. Some people may argue that political communication research is usually interested in election periods since political parties are more interested in garnering votes than in listening to constituents in their capacity as citizens. What relationship management theory alerts to is that a focus that is too centred on election campaigns does not allow for the management of a long term relationship (Karlsson et al., 2013). If, as in the field of corporations and brands, loyalty and trust are achieved over time, then it is important that political parties invest in creating and maintaining long-term relationships with citizens.

Since Obama's 2008 presidential campaign, known as "the first Internet election", there have been studies about the role of political party websites during electoral campaigns (e.g., Levenshus, 2010). However, they have not addressed how to strategically manage the Internet as a relationship-building tool in "normal", longer periods, i.e., the periods between campaigns. This study intends to contribute to fill this gap by centring attention on the case

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of Portuguese political parties' websites, in regard to the participatory tools available and the interactive exchange observed.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Based on the literature review and assuming that creating and nurturing online relationships with citizens political parities may foster political participation, three research questions were established to guide data collection and analysis:

RQ1: How do Portuguese political parties integrate participatory tools into their websites?
RQ2: How do Portuguese political actors interact with citizens via the participatory tools available on their political websites?
RQ3: How do political parties' communication managers perceive and recommend the use of the participatory tools available on political websites?

The first and second research questions are more descriptive and help to understand which participatory tools are available on the websites of the five Portuguese parties that have parliamentary representation and, more importantly, how they are being used by political actors to interact with citizens. The third question aims to contribute to a more reflexive and critical approach to online communication possibilities by exploring political communication managers' perception of those participatory tools and how to strategically manage political actor-citizen relationships.

METHOD

This study utilized three separate methods: content analysis, a controlled experiment and semi-structured interviews. By using multiple methods of data collection, this study triangulated data to better describe and analyse the political actors' relationship management via websites.

With the comparative content analysis, the participatory tools present on the websites of the Portuguese political parties were examined, that is, the tools that allow citizens to create and share political content, get involved in social networks and interact with political actors. The political parties' website content was analysed over a period of 3 months (May-July

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2012) and involved the five Portuguese parties that have parliamentary representation:

- CDS/PP – Democratic Social Centre/Popular Party (Christian democrats, office-seeking)

- PSD – Social Democratic Party (government, catch-all party)

- PS – Socialist Party (opposition, catch-all party)

- PCP – Portuguese Communist Party (Marxist, ideological party)

- BE – Left Bloc (Marxist, ideological party)

To understand how the content generated by Internet users, using the participatory resources available on the websites, is treated by the political parties, an experimental method was also adopted. According to Krupnikov and Levine (2011: p. 149), many of the advances in political communication research are due to the use of experiments. Generally, using the experimental method, messages sent are manipulated to better study the effect produced on a certain target audience over a certain period of time (Hansen & Pfau, 2011, p. 195).

With that aim in mind, three virtual profiles were created (one positive, one neutral and one negative) to test the reaction of political actors to citizens' questions through the participatory resources available on their websites: e-mail, comments on news stories on the website itself and on the Facebook profile linked to the website. The citizen-political party experimental interaction via political parties' websites was carried out from January to May 2013 (one week per month).

After analysing the data gathered using content analysis and the controlled experiment, semi-structured interviews with the five political parties' communication managers were carried out. The interviews, which took place between December 2013 and April 2014, lasted between 30 minutes and one hour and were digitally recorded and transcribed for accuracy. The analysis of the interview transcripts employed a broad thematic discourse framework, where findings were based on the recurrent themes, patterns and categories that surfaced in the discourse (Deacon et al., 2007). Conclusions were drawn by comparing the thematic findings from all interviews. The representative quotations provided in the results section are presented in italic type and have been edited (i.e. repetitions and interjections removed) for ease of understanding, into a narrative form.

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Results

Participatory tools

Using Ramo's (2014) website model of codification and analysis, the political party websites' participatory tools were identified and characterized. All tools allowing an active role from the publics were considered and analysed in relation to 3 aspects - presence, visibility and functionality:

1. Social media (Facebook, Twitter, Google, Hi5, MySpace, YouTube, Flickr, Sapo videos, Vimeo)

2. Web syndication (RSS)

3. Interactive resources: Comments; suggestions; questions; chat rooms; forums.

4. Contact details: e-mail, telephone, address

5. Specific section for participation: e.g., Blogs

Despite differences in number and characteristics, we find that all websites include participatory tools (presence aspect). The main findings are listed as followed:

- Only 3 of the 8 tools[1] are implemented on all websites: *contact details, suggestions and social media.*

- *Comments* and *RSS syndication* exist on 4 websites

- None of the websites include a *Blog*

- Social media is the most common resource on websites (e.g., "Follow us on Facebook")

All websites have easy to use interfaces, as well as clear, updated information; nevertheless, the visibility of the Internet participatory tools varies between websites, from almost hidden to extremely visible (on the landing page). The data shows a trend in the functionality aspect: a lack of participation (publication) in the comments section and a very low frequency of comments as well. An explanation for the low number and frequency of comments, and the almost complete lack of *chats* or *blogs* may also be the transfer of political opinion debate to the social media environment

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[1] The 8 tools analysed were: contact details, comments, suggestions, social media, blogs, surveys, chat rooms, and RSS syndication.

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(in particular, Facebook) – this hypothesis was further analysed with the interaction experiment.

Interaction via political websites

With the controlled experiment it was intended to understand how citizens can use participatory internet tools available on political parties' websites and how political actors are actually using it (for example: if we send an e-mail, will we receive a reply? And how long does it take to receive that reply?). By creating three virtual identities (positive, negative and neutral), interaction with political parties via websites was tested (e-mail, comments both on the website's news stories and also on the Facebook page).

Overall, the five websites showed very low levels of interactivity; in one case, interactivity is even non-existent (CDS/PP) and in others, only contact via e-mail produced feedback (PCP). All the websites allow contact via e-mail (some after user registration), however, in fact, only 2 parties replied to the e-mail (PSD and PCP). In the case of PSD, the reply was signed by a PR practitioner. In the case of the PS website, it was found that the e-mail address did not work.

On the three websites that allow comments (for example, on news or videos) only one (PS) published them. However, comments did not receive any answer and the negative comment was erased/censured after a short period.

The only interaction visible on the website is in the comments section. This interaction is between website users (horizontal communication) that post their opinions. There was no reply to the comments from any official representative of the political party.

After accessing the Facebook page links from the websites, it is also evident that there is no interaction between political parties and citizens. Three parties have an official Facebook profile but only two allow posts to be published. In the case of PS, all positive, negative and neutral comments were posted, although there was no reaction from the party. On the PSD Facebook page, comments are not published and on the BE page only the Like/Share actions are available. Nevertheless, there is a large number of followers, who Like/Share the party's posts.

Interviews

Three main themes emerged regarding how the five political communication managers perceive and recommend the use of the participatory tools available on political websites: information and

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disintermediation; private answers to public questions; and horizontal interaction.

As has been widely debated (e.g., Negrine & Papathanassopoulos, 2011), the changing media landscape offers new opportunities, by allowing political organizations to avoid established media and communicate directly with important publics. It is not surprising, then, as clearly confirmed by all the interviewees, that Portuguese political parties have recently been continually investing in improvements to their institutional websites in terms of design and interface, by integrating new tools (especially social media) and in terms of strategically choosing the content to be included in those spaces. This is supported by the formation of teams within the parties responsible for communication, including specialised professionals (three to seven people), showing, therefore, a move away from amateur work in the field of online communication.

All interviewees acknowledge the central role played by the online media in the political parties' current communication strategies. They view websites as structural elements in the party's information strategy, as an essential means to disseminate political standpoints quickly and, above all, without third-party mediation.

As one of the political communication managers stressed:

> Online vehicles let us communicate the story exactly as it is. Most people in their daily lives interpret the political situation through media sources, which in turn have filters. On our channels, we present the situation exactly as it is for us, the message as we believe it should be conveyed to our publics, whether they are members or not. (Interview, Feb. 2014)

Information and disintermediation are two of the main characteristics attributed to websites. But although the websites work as the "*party's shop window*" and therefore use a top-down, one-directional communication organization, the interviewees did not fail to recognize the potential of two-directional, bottom-up organization in the contact made by citizens via e-mail or the *suggestions* or *comments* section.

"No message is left unanswered"; "When people send private questions we reply to those that we believe are worth replying to", say the communication managers when asked about the way contact from citizens via e-mail is managed. They admit, however, that little attention is given to contact resources, such as *suggestions* or *comments*, in favour of Facebook, which is more suited to interactivity and sharing opinions. Nonetheless, as

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we will see later, there is also no official response from parties to comments on Facebook.

Although three websites (PS, PSD, CDS/PP) allow comments to be published on news stories, throughout the interactive experiment, only one of the comments was published (PS). Two reasons emerge in the answers given by the interviewees to explain this phenomenon: one practical and the other strategic. On the one hand, it is impossible for them to analyse the high number of comments received due to time constraints and limited human resources: "We don't have an army behind the machine!". On the other hand, the strategic choice to moderate all comments, without exception: "We do not publish comments that include offensive words, that clearly violate the Portuguese constitution or harassing messages" (Interview, Feb. 2014).

According to the interviewees, it is much more important to continually monitor the number of visitors to the website, the type of information that is most shared and/or commented on than to develop strategies for dialogic communication with visitors. They never, without exception, reply publically to statements left by visitors in the website's public areas (e.g. *comments*), and prefer to reply by e-mail or even by telephone.

This policy of 'public questions, private answers' extends to social networks too. Just like on the websites, the communication policy followed is to disseminate information, even if it is formatted in accordance with the social network, both in the design of content (e.g. shorter texts, more photographs and videos), and the higher frequency of updates. But interaction, if there is any, is only between visitors and not between politicians and citizens.

The choice to provide horizontal communication to the detriment of politician-citizen interaction is stressed:

> We choose not to debate issues on Facebook (...) It is too much of a risk to start a dialogue with citizens and have to justify standpoints. Because I might have arguments but others may also have some. And it would be a never-ending discussion. (Interview, Feb. 2014)

Another interviewee further argued that:

> We do not react on Facebook because we do not want people to feel that we are conditioning their discussion. (Interview, Feb. 2014)

The interviewees, therefore, look to online resources as a prime vehicle for spreading information and not as an incentive for interaction

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or dialogue between politicians and citizens. One of the interviewees even believes that new technology may be counterproductive:

> Effective political participation cannot be mostly through digital channels. Although these channels may add something and incentivize, because of the information they make available (...) An interesting aspect for those who study these areas lies in the opposite situation: I believe that it would not be impossible to empirically prove that in many circumstances these [online] instruments are a factor in reduced participation. (Interview, Feb. 2014).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As has been found in other research contexts (e.g. Gibson, 2003; Schweitzer, 2005), providing information is a predominant function over promoting interaction or participation in political parties' websites. Our findings corroborate this assumption. Despite Portuguese political party websites' potential to foster dialogic communication and relationship building, when it came to engaging with users, the parties appeared somewhat reluctant. Political parties set the theme of the conversation, offer online spaces for citizens to discuss and debate online but hardly enter into dialogue.

The main findings that underlined this conclusion may be discussed in light of Kent and Taylor's (1998) five dialogic principles. According to the political communication managers, websites are developed to provide updated, dynamic and *useful information* to citizens (whether party members or not), which encourages visitors to *return to the website*. The websites also incorporate easy-to-use interfaces. For example, besides the e-mail contact and link to social networks, present on all websites, in some cases, *comments* and *suggestions* sections are also available. Participatory tools are therefore present on political party websites. However, few dialogic features are actually implemented. Mainly because political actors do not respond to users' comments or demands and when they choose to answer, it is always via private e-mail. This means that despite the *intuitiveness* of the interface, the *dialogic loop* is rarely achieved, which may lead to a limitation in the *conservation of visitors* and above all, block any type of relationship building.

The online relationship building efforts of Portuguese political parties' websites also do not seem to align with Ledingham and Bruning's (1998) dimensions of trust, openness, involvement, commitment and investment.

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By giving users access to participatory tools, political parties are apparently communicating *trust* and fostering *openness* to their publics. By allowing one opinion to be posted on the website, for example, they demonstrate *involvement* in furthering users' interests. However, using the Internet means also being willing to stay open to interactions. And openness also means losing some control of the message and conversation. Well, this is exactly what the political communication managers choose not to embrace when they recommend not answering comments or questions via the website or Facebook. It is true that in recent times Portuguese political parties have been *investing* time, staff, and financial resources into building attractive and updated websites. But if they do not really interact, are political parties really *committed* to maintaining online relationships with citizens?

Bruning (2002) noted that organizations and publics have assumptions about how they expect to be communicated with, and online technology, in particular, can influence these expectations. Simply put: if there is a space on one website to "talk with us", then people expect to enter into a dialogue, not a monologue. This study also demonstrated that dialogue, when it does take place, is not between the party and commenters, but among the commenters themselves – usually between those who defend and those who attack the party's position. Horizontal communication has been considered important to foster civic participation (Dahlgren, 2005), but hardly, it could be argued, contributes to accomplishing political public relations objectives: influencing, establishing, building and maintaining beneficial relationships with publics.

Because political parties depend on citizens, and citizens on politics, one could argue that it would be very important to include dialogic features on websites and, mostly, to use their potentialities. This raises the question of whether websites and web-based communication have been overestimated as a relationship management tool in political public relations despite considerable attention from theorists. Moreover, it seems important to question if this gap could be reduced with a more political public relations perspective in the professionalization of the political communication field. Public relations practitioners could help political parties to develop a strategy for relationship building on digital platforms that embraces the potential for interaction and dialogue.

To finish, two ideas regarding future research. Although this study focuses on the political parties' perspective regarding relationship management via websites and web-based communication, future studies should include a component on how they are received by the public. The

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public's expectations regarding the use of political websites could give important insights into how political public relations should manage political party-citizen online relationships and – by extension – foster political participation.

This study demonstrated that the opposition party (PS) is the one that includes the largest variety of participatory tools and that the website with the lowest level of participatory resources and interactions belongs to the governing party (PSD). Another suggestion for future research could be comparing government-citizen relationship management strategies with political party-citizen relationship management strategies. Such studies could be worthy of analysis, not only in national contexts but also in a broader and more comparative framework.

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