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SELF-MEDIATISATION AS A FEATURE FOR ATTENTION-BASED POLITICS

Norbert Merkovity

Abstract: According to scholars, the use of mediatisation could be understood as a communicative representation of politicians (Mansbridge, 2009) or spin doctoring (Esser, 2008), but either way it ends in self-representation and in "self-initiated stage-management" (Esser, 2013, p. 163). From this perspective, the concept of mediatization is interchangeable with self-mediatisation, where the politicians could do self-broadcasting and start their own race for the attention of the voters. This study will introduce the phenomenon of self-mediatisation as a feature of attention-based politics: when politicians use social media in order to attract, maximize, and direct the attention of followers and journalists.

Keywords: political communication, self-mediatisation, attention-based politics, social media, adoption of media

Introduction

Politicians are using social media platforms to have direct connections with their electorate, every outsider could answer this to the question 'What do politicians do on social media?'. Meanwhile researchers of political communication are trying to explain the nature and aims of their communication (e.g. Aharony, 2012; Ábrahám et al., 2015; Klinger & Svensson, 2015; Loader et al., 2016; Lyons & Veenstra, 2016; Merkovity 2017; Ševa et al., 2016). Mediatisation and media logic are two of many phenomena that frequently appear in these studies.

If we start from media logic, we could say that it is usually used to explain – in simplified terms – the news selection mechanism of media and the nature of politicians' mediatisation (Altheide, 2013; Altheide & Snow, 1979). At present, media logic has become a popular subject again due to the emergence of horizontal media (Shaw et al., 2006), making it necessary to review this theory in political sciences. In political communication, the use of horizontal media in politics raises questions regarding what logic is used by politicians when they communicate on social networking sites (Klinger & Svensson, 2015). Is the traditional mediatisation still in use, or do the politicians use these sites following a new form of logic? This article claims that media logic and mediatisation will be more visible in politicians' use of social networks, since they will not be tied to the communication style of their organisation and they will have the opportunity to formulate their own messages. The aim of this paper is to study the nature of politicians' mediatisation on the basis of

previous research and to provide a possible explanation for their behaviour through self-mediatisation and the race for voters' attention.

From Mediatisation to Self-Mediatisation

Examining the relationship between politicians and media has been the subject of scientific research for long. Daniel Boorstin was one of the first researchers to analyse this relationship in the age of the television. He argued that the media produces pseudo-events for the audience that the politicians adapt to. They recognize how the media constructs reality and how they can use this knowledge in their actions (Boorstin, 1992 [1961]). Boorstin has highlighted the unspoken mediatisation of politicians, but this expression did not take on its final meaning in political communication. Some researchers consider it as an all-encompassing, collective term (Deacon & Stanyer, 2014), while others interpret it as an 'incomplete and still unfolding historical project' (Livingstone, 2009).

Mediation is a cognate concept that aims to explain the transmission nature of communication process and mass media, but mediation is unable to respond to the nature of actions and reactions between the players of political communication. Nevertheless, the phenomenon of mediation might be preferred over mediatisation in the Western literature, and is used in much wider terms compared to transmission (see: Couldry, 2008; Livingstone, 2009). However, Jesper Strömbäck states that mediatisation is a process where the independence of politics from media (more precisely, from the editing/display formats used in media) can be analysed (Strömbäck, 2008). Four phases of mediatisation may be distinguished in this analysis process, where the mediation of politics, e.g. the recognition of media's transmission, is the first phase of the mediatisation of politics. In the second phase, mediatisation uses media logic during the operation of politics, and media logic becomes dominant in the third phase; politicians adapt it, leaving the party logic completely in the background. In the fourth phase of mediatisation, besides adaptation, politicians adopt media logic, and they use it not only during campaigns, but in the interim period as well (Strömbäck, 2008; Strömbäck & Esser, 2014). Therefore, the four phases of mediatisation describe the political inclusion process of formats used by media.

Although mediatisation (and media logic) has got critics (e.g. Deacon & Stanyer, 2014; Hepp, 2012), it is in the focus of political communication and media studies research. Gianpietro Mazzoleni states that a clear distinction has to be made between mediation and mediatisation. He considers that mediatisation is a complex process that shows a strong link with media logic. Mediation is the natural and predestined mission of media, where communicators endow events with meaning for their audience (see: Mazzoleni, 2015). Accepting this view, we should make a distinction between transmission and the process it is involved in. One of the first analysers of mediatisation and media logic, David L. Altheide, states that mediation refers to the media logic effect of the medium that is present in the communication process. In that process, the (media) formats of information and communication technologies unite with the place and time of events. Mediatisation is the process by which all this takes place, including the institutionalization of media and the combination of its forms (Altheide, 2013, pp. 225-226). Altheide's mediatisation theory is more than an 'unfolding historical project', and regards media logic as its integral part rather than a separate phenomenon. Therefore, mediatisation is an organizing principle that includes media logic and media formats, and can be found in the information and communication

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processes. Accepting that theory, its additional characteristics can also be determined, that improve understanding of mediatisation in the context of social networking sites.

However, we have to add one more feature. Mediatisation is not linear on social networks, but a multi-directional and multidimensional process, where its impacts include strategic adaptation; this concept is not normative, and consequences do not depend on normative aspects (Strömbäck & Esser, 2014). As long as mediatisation can be regarded as automatism in media, politicians have professionalized the art of news management in order to control the consequences of free publicity. Furthermore, they use mediatisation to frame and pack the events (Brants et al., 2010; Negrine et al., 2007). Politicians exploit automatism, which brings us to the self-mediatisation of politics (Esser, 2013; Meyer, 2002). This means that focus is shifted from the parties to the politicians, and mediatisation can be interpreted as their communicative representation (Mansbridge, 2009), but it can also refer to 'spin doctors' (Esser, 2008), although, in each case, ends at self-representation and 'self-initiated stage-management' (Esser, 2013, p. 163). Thus, mediatisation cannot be considered as an automatism in the world of politics, but as a functional principle that results from the operation of media, more specifically in this study, from the operation of social media. The only question is whether we can any examples outside of social media?

Examples for Self-Mediatisation

The intention to grab the attention of the voters was always part of political. Politicians were using the 'media of their age' to some extent and while they were doing this the self-mediatisation process of their age went through. The common element of this behaviour is attention. In democratic circumstances, attention is typically linked to conquering votes and achieving interest in topics, that is, it can be grasped in the relationship between the political actor and the voter. In this form, we could find this phenomenon in earlier times as well.

The Commentariolum petitionis of Rome from the late period of the Republic mentions several techniques for drawing attention (Cicero, 2006), and it is fair to regard these as an early description of attention based politics. For example, the manual by the brother of the famous rhetor, Marcus Cicero gives a detailed account of the moments when attention can be attracted. For example, when the candidate marches to the forum, he should make as many people march with him as possible, thus demonstrating the magnitude of his support, or he should make connection with wealthy people in order to win the acknowledgement of the high societies (as well as for financial support). Another element linked to attention in the era was the white toga (toga candida), which had the special purpose of signifying to the society the people who were applying for political offices. With this method they could distinguish themselves from the crowd, and direct attention to themselves.

Directing attention is inherent in the concept of attention. For example, very few people knew of the American president Franklin D. Roosevelt (1933-1945) at the time that he was forced to spend most of his time in a wheelchair. He never showed up like this in public, most of the time he stood in one place or was supported by his helpers. The president did not let people judge him based on his physical condition, as his advisors thought that he would never have been elected president in knowledge of this. He also agreed with journalists that they would not take pictures of him in a wheelchair (Gallagher, 1999, p. 94). However, the reason why people from the media engaged in this game has never been revealed. Yet directing attention was made complete by the 'new' medium of the era, the

radio. Roosevelt was one of the first politicians to give regular speeches on the radio. The texts of these speeches reflected the image of a strong leader ready for action, who – mainly as a result of his wife's tours in the country – knows the issues of the United States and the world. Through this one-way channel, the president appeared virtually in the living rooms of the listeners (Stone, 1991, p. 87), thereby realizing the model example of directing and canalizing attention.

In addition to directing attention, French president Charles de Gaulle (1959–1969) also used television regularly in order to raise attention. This is still a one-way channel, which also has a visual aspect. The president, perhaps even unintentionally, set the aim of gaining the attention of the public through his television (and other public) speeches and his indispensable gesticulation. This is why French presidents have paid attention to their television appearances since the fifties of the last century, as it is through these appearances that the French public makes a connection between the political actor and the political position since de Gaulle (for more details, see: Gaffney, 2010). American president Ronald Reagan (1981-1989) used television in a similar way, and making way for popular political communication. Symbols played an important role in his speeches, and their role was to grasp and direct attention, preferably in a more expressive way than his opponents did. Thus, raising attention became secondary, and an image came to the foreground, emphasising the person himself rather than the content of the speech. In the case of Reagan, this tactic for directing attention served the purpose of concealing the 'deficiencies' in his political program. That is, he focused attention on the goal instead of the road that leads there. Of course the president needed to be aware of the impact of the media on image in order to do this (Covington et al., 1993, p. 797). Reagan also had an impact on other American and European politicians, who increasingly put emphasis on their image instead of their political program.

The last example is from the recent past, and it represents the era after the Internet. In his 2008 US presidential election campaign, Barack Obama (2009–2017) was eager to address online communities. Prior to the elections, the power of online communities for shaping politics seemed more like a myth than actual political potential. Obama used YouTube, MySpace, Facebook, Twitter, and other social sites for maximizing attention. A favourable image in itself is not enough if it is not accompanied by constant attention, which forces the opponent to the background. Through the phenomenon referred to as the 'Obama effect', the campaign team offered a peek into the daily life of the campaign through bits of exclusive content to followers on social media, which attracted the attention of traditional media, which then initiated further discourse about the candidate. Another result of attention maximizing is the involvement of the – traditionally apolitical – youth in the campaign as volunteers. The campaign brought 3.1 million individual (monetary) supporters and more than 5 million volunteers. In addition to this, the candidate became a constant topic in conversations among the voters, and he actually reached celebrity status (Cogburn & Espinoza-Vasquez, 2011; Marx et al., 2009).

The past examples listed here demonstrate the communicative use of attention for political purposes. However, the different aspects of grabbing attention can not only be described at the time of election campaigns or media appearances. It is visible in the use of social networking sites in politics that has brought forth the intensification of the self-mediatisation phenomenon.

Self-Mediatisation and the Attention-Based Politics

It is important for politicians how they look in vertical media channels and what is shared in connection with them in horizontal media, but it is equally important for them to mediate contents to their followers intentionally by eliminating gatekeepers, and control their attention. The latter only depends on them; they do not have to influence editors or journalists to reach their goal. Furthermore, it can be concluded that the consequences of self-mediatisation are visible in the race for the attention. Politicians often tend to force their own information on followers and journalists through social networking sites, by which they frame information in advance, before they get embedded in public consciousness. By reason of the nature of informational communication (representation), 'here and now' type of information prevails, which is also reflected in vertical news production (see: Blumler, 2014).

Moreover, this is not a phenomenon of a particular countries' politics, but it could be seen in most of the countries. Historical and cultural differences between states, and differences in political systems could echo back. However, as the homogenizing nature of social networks makes its impact on the race for the attention and the use of self-mediatisation is becoming universal.

The race for the attention could be seen as the rise of *attention-based politics*, where the traditional communicative space of politicians changes the platform. In attention-based politics, the emphasis will be on the use of media. Online communication will be important, as it accommodates different events of social life. Voters also play an active part in this communication, they are not passive like the consumers of traditional media. However, active participation does not entail interactivity, as the majority of political actors will avoid situations where they engage directly with voters, for example through dialogue (see: Aharony, 2012). Thus attention based politics, as we saw in the examples cited, is not linked to interactivity, its essence is drawing, maximizing and directing attention. It is more similar to self-mediatisation, or the other way around, self-mediatisation is an important feature to shape the contemporary race for the attention.

As descriptive definition, we could state that "attention-based politics describes the process in which politicians use their communication to draw the attention of the biggest possible crowd of the audience (voters) to themselves or to the themes they propose in the multitude of information or news flows. In the meantime, this attention should not be confused with agenda setting, as it is not about policies but about the politicians, or the manifestations of political questions by politicians" (Merkovity, 2017, p. 52).

Conclusion

Research show that politicians use social networks for communication in a press conference-manner, typically not exploiting the opportunities of two-way communication (see: Aharony, 2012; Ábrahám et al., 2015; Lyons & Veenstra, 2016; Negrine et al., 2007). Features of network media logic (self-mediatisation) can be seen, but the nature of mass media logic is also visible in their communication.

Politicians typically use online communication means as one-way channels, just like they use vertical media. This form of representation, more particularly, self-representation function prevails political discourses in horizontal media as well and ends in self-

mediatisation. It can be explained by the fact that representatives can effectively avoid unintended consequences of interactivity (e.g. criticisms) in social media use in such a way that they make multi-directional platforms uni-directional with their communication. The aim is to avoid critics from the electorate and to gain more followers. This brings us to the conclusion, information technology and formats enabling politicians to personalize messages, what they use to maximize the attention of the followers. However, the race for the attention and adopting the mediums of an era was always part of politics.

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