

Politicising Platform, or Another Campaign Tool: Locality-Related Differences in the Perception of Facebook's Role in Pre- Election Period

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Abstract

In recent years, Facebook has become a regular part of political campaigning and as such a subject of an extensive research. Yet relatively few studies have focused on audience perspective and the perception of Facebook in campaigns. The aim of this explorative study is to contribute to this area; it compares perceptions of Facebook's role in a campaign held before communal elections in two localities in the Czech Republic. Based on qualitative data from diary research and semi-structured interviews, it discusses the role of communication context (especially the character and diversity of local information channels) in the perceived position and influence of Facebook in the pre-election period. The results show that both Facebook's role and influence can be understood quite differently, depending on the character of communication platforms used in the campaign. The study also analyses people's expectations of the social media site, which in turn may lead to certain disillusionment as to the character (especially interactivity) of the campaign and, consequently, politics in general.

Keywords: Facebook; media perception; media use; election; diary research

Introduction

Despite growing evidence that Facebook's contribution to political activity is not as extensive as one may have expected, the social media site has undoubtedly changed the character of political campaigning. Thanks to extensive research, we know how politicians and political parties utilise Facebook during campaigns (e.g. Ross et al. 2015; Lilleker et al. 2015; Lilleker 2014). However, much less is known about the users' (prospective voters) actual use of Facebook for political purposes, and about its perception, which is an important precondition of the willingness to use it. Moreover, when analysing differences between Facebook's political role, current research pays most attention to the significance of age or gender (e.g. Taraszow et al. 2010), which may not be the only relevant factors.

This research tries to fill in some of these gaps. It focuses on the importance of local specifics – concretely of the character and diversity of local information channels – for Facebook's perception before the 2014 Czech communal election. This type of election differs from others because it is strongly related to the local context in which the character of the media landscape cannot be ignored. However, one might argue that regarding Facebook's affordances, its role should be perceived in the same way everywhere. The paper's main research question is the following: How do people perceive the role of Facebook in the campaign in two different localities and how do they explain this perception?

Based on qualitative data from semi-structured interviews and diary research, the study shows that the character of the campaign and the context of political communication are important as regards the perception of Facebook's political role. Conversely, the actual use of Facebook, tracked in the diaries, depended mostly on the purpose for which Facebook is used by the people (participants). In the following

text, I firstly briefly introduce four patterns of Facebook usage, focusing on the motivation for, and self-reflection of, people's Facebook activity. The major part of the article then focuses on the differences in the perceived role of Facebook in the election campaign. The results show that the respondents from the small city studied tended to emphasize the politicizing character of Facebook and considered it as a platform which could supplement an almost non-existent campaign. Contrary to this, the people from the large city studied tended to sceptically condemn Facebook as "just another" campaign tool. The background of these attitudes is further elaborated, showing also certain disillusionment – which comes from unfilled expectations – regarding the use of Facebook in the campaign.

On Facebook, voters, and elections

After its first significant involvement in the 2006 US congressional elections (Williams & Gullati 2012), and especially after attracting great attention during Barack Obama's successful 2008 presidential campaign (Woolley et al. 2010), in Western democracies Facebook became a common part of political campaigns and for the circulation of political messages (Chan & Guo 2013; Enli et al. 2013; Lilleker & Jackson 2010; MacNamara & Kenning 2011; Ross et al. 2015; Vaccari et al. 2013). In the Czech Republic, as in similar countries, the implementation of Facebook in campaigns was slower; Facebook was first ascribed an important influence in the 2013 presidential elections (Gregor & Matušková 2014), the first direct presidential election in the country. From this turning point on, politicians and political parties started to use Facebook quite extensively in pre-election periods, though in between elections such activity still declines significantly (Štětka et al. 2014). With 4.2 million users, it is the most popular social networking site (SNS) in the country and the most popular platform for political communication. Unlike in other countries, the position of the worldwide second strongest SNS, Twitter (with 284,000 users, even fewer than Instagram), is quite weak in the Czech Republic. Only a minority of Czech politicians has a Twitter account (and even fewer use it regularly) (Karaščáková 2013).

Although soon after its widespread usage it became apparent that Facebook may not in fact change the content of the campaigns and that the new platform tends to be used for the distribution of more or less "old-tech messages" (Ross et al. 2015, p. 2), the form of campaigning has undergone certain changes (see Lilleker 2014). Among others, the enhancement of direct communication between citizens and politicians has been emphasized as an important feature of Facebook (Lilleker & Jackson 2010) since it creates a new kind of relationship between citizens and their elected representatives and opens a space for interactivity. It is believed that this more direct and less centralised mode of political communication may have a positive effect on people's participation in political debates and, consequently, their willingness to go to the polls. Yet, there seems not to be a clear consensus in this regard (Gibson & Cantijoch 2013; Gil de Zúñiga, Molyneux & Zheng 2014; Štětka & Mazák 2014).

However, the role of Facebook in the pre-election period should not be reduced only to people's participation in debates and their activity on the site (e.g. sharing or liking). Facebook is a complex environment that offers its users an ever wider range of potential purposes, including status-seeking and building of so-called social capital (Miller et al. 2015); for entertainment (Hew 2011; Park et al. 2009); or chatting with friends (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke 2008). It is also an online space through which people get information and maintain

contact with people and institutions (Ellison & Boyd 2013; Vitak & Ellison 2013), and as such, it can influence one's political knowledge (Dahlgren 2013). This knowledge is often quite superficial, but it does help one to have an overview of current affairs. In this sense, Facebook can be considered as an awareness system (Hermida 2010). According to Hermida (who originally refers to Twitter), SNSes provide people with ambient information, which either stays on the periphery or may become the centre of their attention and thus help people be aware of the world around them (Hermida 2010). This means that Facebook not only changes the character of the relationship between citizens and politicians, it also shifts the way people get information about the campaign, which might in turn influence their experience and perception of it.

Audience perspective and the role of context

When evaluating the role of a particular media channel, the perspective of an audience often offers a different angle than does the macro-studies of production or content (Coleman 2013, p. vii). This study focuses specifically on this micro-level of people's experience with and perception of the role of Facebook in the campaign. In general, the perceived power and role of media may influence people's attitudes towards them as well as their motivations to use the media and the ways they are used (Ball-Rokeach 1998; Johnston et al. 2013; McLeod et al. 1994).

We know already from the pioneering studies (e.g. Lang & Lang 1953) that media exposure is not only crucial for creating expectations about the "world outside" but also for how the media themselves are perceived. The latter is important especially as regards the media's credibility and perceived power (Tsfati 2014). Although trust in the media is rather a complex phenomenon that is dependent upon many other factors – such as general trust in politics, interpersonal trust or even the type of personality (see Ross 2009; Tsfati 2014), their critique in other media, word-of-mouth evaluations or common sense. To put it simply, the social discourse about media (Watts et al. 1999) plays a considerable part. The evaluation of the media thus reflects personal needs and interests, but at the same time it also overcomes them. People have certain shared normative expectations based on their perception of the media's role within the society, it seems, which cannot be explained simply by personal characteristics (Guo 2000).

The communication context is quite helpful in this regard. In local elections, although they are held throughout the country, people in a particular locality are dependent upon information sources that are available for them, and the campaigns thus differ locality to locality. Studies of audiences (Livingstone & Des 2013; Morley 1992) have always emphasized the importance of either the individual or social context in which the consumption of media messages is situated. In the field of politics and democracy participation, this context can be conceptualised as constituting a civic culture (Dahlgren 2009; 2013). Dahlgren (2009:103) defines civic cultures as "a cultural environment" that provides conditions for civic engagement. Civic cultures "consist of patterns of communication, practices, and meaning; they provide taken-for-granted orientations (...) as well as other resources for collective life" (ibid.). Dahlgren also offers six constituents of civic cultures (knowledge, values, trust, spaces, practices and identities), which all can be shaped by the media, but at the same time can reciprocally influence media use (Dahlgren 2009:104). This approach is useful because it helps to overcome the tendency of many studies to set Facebook apart from the context of other media that interact with each other and constitute the current hybrid media system (Chadwick

2013). The focus on Facebook use and perception in the context of the specific, local campaign, thus also sheds light on the contribution of Facebook to the particular civic culture.

Methodology

The study draws on two sources of data. Firstly, a paper-and-pencil diary research (Bolger et al. 2003; Nezlek 2012) was applied to capture immediately the use and perception of Facebook and other media during the campaign. For the period of 19 days before the elections (22. 9.–10. 10. 2014), an interval-contingent diary (Wheeler and Reis 1991) was used. The participants were asked to fill out a short form every day that consisted of a free space, which offered a possibility to associate everything related to the campaign, and several open-ended questions (that aimed not only at Facebook but also at the use and perception of local media and the campaign in general). The paper-and-pencil form was preferred since some of the participants had suggested, after the pilot testing, that it would be more comfortable for them to use than the online form (for the advantages/disadvantages of paper/electronic diary, see Green et al. 2006). In the middle of the diary research, a more or less technical interview took place to ensure that the filling out of the diaries went smoothly.

Before and after the diary research, semi-structured interviews (lasting from 35 to 55 minutes each) were conducted with the participants. The first interview focused on participants' general evaluation of local politics and local media and was thus used mostly to contextualise the rest of the data. The second (post-election) interview targeted the evaluation of the whole pre-election period and the clarifications of some ambiguities in the diaries.

The study included 22 people (all Facebook users; all the participants were guaranteed anonymity) from two different Czech localities, 9 of whom were from the small town of Nové Město na Moravě (see below) and 13 of whom were from the fourth-largest Czech city, Pilsen. The data used here are part of a larger research inquiring into the use and perception of local media; thus, the sample was chosen on purpose to include people who had declared that they regularly followed local media. The sample consisted of people of different age groups (4 were college students, 3 retirees and the rest working people aged from 25 to 60), genders, as well as education and social positions, in order to avoid any biases. The data were analysed using open and axial coding (Schreier 2012; Saldaña 2013). All the entries (diaries and interviews) related to a participant were analysed together so as to be able to recognise the personal context of the individual participants.

Context

The research was conducted in two localities with markedly different positions, demographic characteristics, and characters of information sources. Nové Město na Moravě, a small city with 10,000 inhabitants, does not have its own daily, nor its own local newspaper, television or radio station. The most important information source for the city is thus the bi-weekly *Novoměstsko* and the announcements of the municipal radio, which both present official information prepared by the local government's press office. Another

important source is the print daily *Žďárský deník* and its online version, which cover a larger geographic area of a district (that includes two cities of similar size, Nové Město na Moravě and Žďár nad Sázavou). The second locality is the fourth-largest Czech city, Pilsen (168,000 inhabitants), which has a much richer system of local media; these include the printed and online daily *Plzeňský deník*, several online news services (*plzen.cz*, *plzenskenovinky.cz*, etc.) as well as a TV station (*ZAK*). As Pilsen was in line to become the 2015 European Culture Capital, the communal election there attracted special attention not only among local inhabitants but also from the nationwide media.

The election took place on 10 and 11 October 2014. That year, it was the second election after the EU elections, which were held in May. The intensity of Facebook involvement in the campaign differed in the two localities. In Pilsen, 11 out of 17 political parties or movements that contested in the elections had Facebook pages and used them regularly. In some cases, the most prominent local politicians had also their own official pages (e.g. the popular mayor of the city at the time, Martin Baxa). However, the number of “likes” on these Facebook pages was in many cases lower than 200 (whereas the most active movement, *Změna pro Plzeň*, achieved more than 2,700 likes). In general, it was evident that some parties did not consider Facebook to be an important tool whereas the others, mostly the local movements and parties (those who did not have connections to national parties), used it more extensively. On the contrary, there was almost no Facebook campaign in Nové Město na Moravě: only 1 out of 9 parties had a local-specific official Facebook page (and that with only 45 likes). Also, no politician had his/her own official Facebook page.

Results

The following presentation of the results has two main parts. First, I briefly present four patterns of Facebook use that can be found in the diaries. These patterns are structured according to the level to which Facebook is involved in seeking political information and the sources (Facebook pages, friends...) that the participants used for that. In line with existing literature about uses and gratifications, Facebook use seems to depend mostly on specific individual needs. However, the data show that the individual needs also partially relate to availability of other information sources in the locality. In the second part, differences in perception of the role of Facebook are discussed in detail. Regardless of the actual use of the site, the perception of the role, power and influence of Facebook is greatly dependent on the local context.

Facebook use patterns

1. By far the largest group of participants (9 people) stated that they do not use Facebook for seeking general information about their locality, or for information about local politics. Rather they preferred sharing personal information with their friends and families, or they opened their Facebook account to stay in touch with a particular interest community. Since they deliberately limited their network of their friends, they tried not to fill the space with information they consider irrelevant – including political information. As a reason for not using Facebook as a source of information about politics or public affairs, they usually argue that the

information can be found elsewhere, and so they do not want to “be bothered” in this “specific companion” (NMM01, interview on 10 September 2014). Nonetheless, almost all of those participants also implicitly suggest that their way of using Facebook may not be the proper one¹, which indicates a popular expectation of its political role.

2. The second largest group (7 participants) used Facebook for seeking general information about the locality. Usually, they followed some local media or the official Facebook account of the municipality, and usually because they were interested in information about current affairs. Some of them also followed political parties or candidates on Facebook, but, generally, they stated having no or little interest in political issues on Facebook, or even that they try to ignore them. The reason for “liking” a party or individual politician for these respondents was not their interest in the campaign as such but as an expression of favouring the particular party or candidate (“I just ‘liked’ them, nothing more. Of course they now pop up sometimes – that’s inevitable. But I don’t pay attention.” PLZF01, interview on 10 September 2014).

Despite the rejection of politics by both of these groups, the diary entries show that politics is inevitably present on their Facebook walls, contributes to their knowledge, and thus serves as the awareness system (Hermida 2010); in some – extraordinary – cases, even provoking them to comment on political issues.

3. For the third group of 3 participants, Facebook helped them decide how to vote. In this case, the participants followed on the site several political parties or candidates they were considering voting for.² They systematically observed activities of the parties/individuals in order to either reinforce or revise their choices. This kind of Facebook use was likened to the RSS principle since it allows following only those political subjects that are relevant for the people. Also a time-saving aspect of this “living through the campaign” (PLZF02, interview on 17 October 2014) was mentioned repeatedly.

4. The last group (also of 3 participants) consisted of those who had already decided how they would vote and at the same time had expressed their interest in politics. Compared to the previous groups, they intentionally participated actively on Facebook with a clear aim of supporting their favourite party or candidate (by sharing, commenting, liking). For these participants, Facebook was a platform that allowed them to “broaden their voice” (PLZF12, interview on 17 October 2014) beyond simply casting a ballot – for instance, by the potential to persuade other people about the qualities of their favourite candidate/party. Moreover, this type of support is described as not demanding though it is believed to be quite influential.

Perception of Facebook’s role in the campaign

...just a new form of billboard campaign.

As noted above, the popularity of Facebook pages of political parties in Pilsen was much lower than was the case with the national or EU elections that were held in October 2013 and May 2014, respectively. However,

¹ e.g. “I use Facebook in a specific way” (NMF04), “I use it *just* for conversations with friends” (NMM01), “I am not a proper user of Facebook; I only communicate there with a narrow group of friends” (PLZM01).

² In case of Nové Město na Moravě, there was no party with a localised Facebook account. The participants thus followed the central (general, nationwide) Facebook account of the parties.

all the participants included in the study in Pilsen sooner or later came in contact with at least some messages from the political parties, whether they were displayed directly on their newsfeed (in case they followed some party/individual politician), indirectly via their friends' shares or comments, or popped up on them as a paid advertising. Especially the advertising sometimes lead to certain confusion, which came from a limited awareness or understanding of Facebook's algorithms. For many participants, it was not clear why they cannot see all the parties in their newsfeed; others expressed surprise that they see content from parties which they had never "liked" nor interacted with (on Facebook), or which are even not their favourites. A sense of displeasure from the fact that "it is not me but someone else who selects the information" (PLZF12, interview on 17 October 2014) was expressed as well. This often inspired speculation about the functioning – and intents – of Facebook that also show the cautiousness of the participants towards the social networking site itself and their distrust of the ways in which it spreads information. The following quotes illustrate that:

More and more, I register a flow of paid political advertisements on Facebook. But I have a feeling that Martin Baxa [the then mayor of Pilsen] is popping up on [my newsfeed] all the time. Either I focus only on him, or he has the most intensive campaign. (PLZF01, diary entry from 6 October 2014)

We discussed with my friends how it is possible that someone appears there if you don't follow the party. (PLZF11, interview on 17 October 2014)

In general, the tendency of the participants from the large city was to describe Facebook as full of messages from the parties, yet they were mostly critical towards their style and omnipresence. The critique focused on the lack of creativity and the repetitive character of the whole campaign, namely on the fact that "what appeared on billboards appeared also in the newspaper and on Facebook, which becomes pretty irksome after a week or two" (PLZF02, interview on 17 October 2014). Those who followed more media thus felt they were being "punished" for their attention since they heard or read the same slogans and saw the same pictures over and over again. In their perception, Facebook was just another channel through which political parties distributed information that was already mentioned elsewhere. In this regard, Facebook was congruently compared to the billboards, in its function as well as in the content of information available there:

On Facebook, there was only brief information. Like vote Babiš, he is good and so on. (...) Which leads one to a question: What is its added value? (PLZF06, interview on 17 October 2014)

For me, it [Facebook] was a new wall which was posted up by political advertising. Almost the same like all the billboards around the main roads. The only difference was that, thanks to Facebook, there was no need to go out to see the campaign. It was just in your computer. All the faces were there. (PLZF05, interview on 17 October 2014)

However, although Facebook tended to be compared to billboards, there was also reflected an important difference between these two platforms. While the billboards and all the other channels of the campaign were considered to be part of the “outside world”, Facebook campaigns were mainly seen to be entering people’s “private world”. The Facebook wall was by almost all the participants regarded as a private space that is conditioned according their individual interests. It is described as a place for “meeting friends”, “contacting family” or “getting information of personal interest” – and anything that does not fit into these categories represent the price for using the free service. In any case, the respondents tended to be more critical towards the appearance of political information (especially the unwanted ones) on their wall, more than they were in case of other forms of advertising.

For the evaluation of the role of Facebook, the distinction between private and outside (or public) seems to be an important one. Whereas in the “outside world” one can decide whether she will face up to or ignore the campaign, this is described as much more difficult once it becomes part of her “private space”. The consequences of this break into private space are twofold. One group of the participants expressed strong negative emotions about the fact they could not find a safe space, a space where they could hide from the campaign. Even if they were interested in politics and had decided to participate in the election, they pleaded to “switch off all the politics at least once in a while” (PLZF09, diary entry from 8 October 2014). The omnipresence of the campaign was also often evaluated as counter-productive. Some of the participants were persuaded that the intensity of the campaign might not attract new voters but might rather annoy those who already intended to vote, including themselves.

It annoyed me. On the street you are assaulted by billboards or people around the election stands. The latter you can at least bypass, which is not possible on Facebook. (PLZF11, interview on 22 October 2014)

I don't see any sense in that. If you are interested in the election at least a little bit, you get quickly tired by the repetition of almost the same slogans. I can imagine that people get pissed off and decide not to go to the polls. (PLZF01, diary entry from 8 October 2014)

Others voiced a self-reflective anxiety that the exposure to a “massage of political messages” on Facebook may influence their own opinion and decision (regarding their fellow citizens, this influence was taken for granted). In this sense, the perforation of the campaign into their private space was believed to make people more vulnerable to the campaign. Attention was paid particularly to the extent of visibility of different parties on Facebook. If their favoured party was not much present on their wall, some participants reflected a tendency to question whether their favoured party would be successful enough to pass the electoral threshold.

At this time (before the election) you're massaged on your Facebook. And this is the core of Facebook's power; if you spend hours a day on the site, you may later vote for those you saw most often. (PLZF01, interview on 17 October 2014)

I didn't see the Social Democrats much there (on Facebook). I don't know whether they focus on different target groups or what. I am pretty sure they will succeed since they are also in the (national) government. But if someone's judgements were based only on the Facebook presence, it might seem that the Social Democrats wouldn't go over the required 5% [threshold]. (PLZF02, diary entry from 6 October 2014)

...at least you had a feeling there would be election.

Since no party in the election in Nové Město na Moravě had its own Facebook page, the only way residents got information related to the election was via their friends' profiles or via shared articles from the media. Political advertising was barely noticed in the diaries, whilst the importance of media as setters of the topics that appeared on Facebook was mentioned repeatedly.

Well, there sometimes was something about local politics. But usually it was a link shared by my friend, a link to an article from [the local daily] Žďárský deník. And sometimes there was a short discussion about it. (NMF01, interview on 15 October 2014)

The role of Facebook in this locality tended to be contrasted to the campaign; thus, the site was more or less considered to be a separate space, independent from the parties and their respective messages. Moreover, it was also often described as a space where the upcoming election was more noticeable than in the streets of the city. In this sense, the participants tended to ascribe Facebook a politicising role. In contrast to the almost invisible campaign (with only several posters and almost no direct campaign), on Facebook they saw articles, pictures, posts or comments related to the election, if not directly in their city, then at least in the others.

The truth is that the campaign was almost invisible. (...) But on Facebook, you could see your friends discussing elections in Prague or elsewhere. So you got into the mood, you know? (NMF03, interview on 15 October 2014)

But, right, there were some discussions, whom will you vote and so on. I didn't participate, but... You saw someone talking about the elections, which is good, I would say. (...) The official campaign rather more wasn't there than was, but you got some information from Facebook. (NMF04, interview on 15 October 2014)

If we compare this with the situation in Pilsen, it seems that the participants have a certain (partially individual and partially shared) idea about what constitutes the ideal amount of information about the parties and candidates that should be delivered during the campaign. In Pilsen, the level was considered to be too high, whereas the politicians in Nové Město na Moravě did not reach it. The role of Facebook was closely related to this "general feeling" of the campaign and its evaluation could be partially biased by this feeling.

Nonetheless, in Pilsen, Facebook was regarded as multiplier of the already intensive campaign; in Nové Město na Moravě, it was rather regarded as a substitution (at least to some extent) of the almost non-existent campaign.

Expectations from Facebook campaign

Exploring further the two localities, it appears that the differences in perception of Facebook's role go along with different expectations of Facebook in the campaigns. Partially, these expectations build on a quite extensive public discourse about the contribution of social networking sites and "new" media to contemporary campaign strategies. However, they were also context-specific since they were formulated and articulated as a response to the situation in the particular locality.

...requirement of interactivity.

As we showed in the previous part, in the Pilsen case, Facebook was largely criticised for not providing any original content but rather repeating what was already written on the billboards or used elsewhere in the campaign. In general, the participants had expected Facebook to play an important role in the campaign, especially in attempts to address the younger generation. The criticism towards the role of Facebook focused not so much on the intensity of the campaign which was run there (although some complaints on "floods" of information were mentioned already), but on its form (namely its "repetitiveness").

What the participants expected from Facebook was a higher level of interactivity and a more dialogical character of the communication. These are considered as the extra qualities of Facebook which differentiate it from the other media channels. Since the parties and politicians do not use this "advantage", the participants expressed a certain disillusionment. To pay for a one-way oriented campaign and the small effort to engage citizens is, according to majority of the participants, a sign of politicians' disinterest in spending their time engaging with voters.

PLZF09: Facebook – that was only self-promotion, (...) sadly. Maybe I expected something different, something more. But I don't know, maybe someone liked it.

Interviewer: What "different" or "more" did you expect?

PLZF09: I don't know. That they would try to encourage discussions. Speak to people. Not just saying, 'Come, there is a meeting tomorrow!' Or using pictures with their brief slogans. This can't start a discussion. (PLZF09, interview on 14 October 2014)

The campaign there (on Facebook) was quite massive though I expected more interaction. More or less it was only pictures or links that were shared. Or that's how it seemed to me. (PLZF04, interview on 17 October 2014)

These expectations of interactivity also built on the fact that the “communal election” is much closer to the people than the national one. Thus, the politicians should have a more intensive contact with their voters and are expected to show more interest in their needs and opinions. As one participant wrote:

There is no easier way to contact people than via Facebook. And if all the Facebook communication of the party is 'Vote for us, vote for us, vote for us!', then it shows how they are narcissistic. (They have) no interest in anyone else. (PLZF08, interview on 17 October)

...requirement of activity.

Although the participants in Nové Město na Moravě perceived Facebook's role in a much more positive way, they also expressed a certain disillusionment about the way the site was (or was not, to be precise) used in the campaign. Here, the expectations were lower – the majority simply thought politicians would use the tool which they thought is already a common part of the campaign. Using all the resources that are available is reflected as a basic part of professionalism. The question of “professionalism” of the campaign seemed to be much more important in this locality than in Pilsen, and many of the participants tended to connect the eligibility of the parties with the quality of the campaign. The more professional the campaign (in their opinion), the more they tended to see it as relevant. Not including Facebook in the campaign was then regarded as “not professional”.

While the majority of participants admitted that for a city of 10,000 inhabitants where many know each other and face-to-face communication may be better than Facebook, politicians' use of the site still was important for them. At least, by using Facebook the politicians could have shown they follow recent trends in political campaigning – which in a way shows they are flexible and open to new things (which may be important characteristics for their political careers). In this sense, Facebook use was considered not so much a means of communication but an attribute that may have influenced the status of a particular party or politician. This is reflected also in speculation about politicians' inability to use Facebook, which was mentioned as the most important reason why the site actually was not used in the campaign. In any case, the perception that politicians were disinterested in hearing people's voice (and their votes), demonstrated by their absence on Facebook, resonates in Nové Město na Moravě similarly as it does in Pilsen.

I think the politicians here still don't know how to use it [Facebook], still don't understand it's potential. We are not a big city, but still... Three, four thousand people, younger people mostly, have Facebook. But they are not contacted. (NMM03, interview on 15 October 2014)

What can be cheaper than making a campaign on Facebook? But nobody did it. Together with a very weak campaign in general, I was just wondering: Hey, guys, are you even interested in my vote? (NMF04, interview on 15 October 2014)

Perception of Facebook influence

Since the role of Facebook in the campaign was perceived differently, depending on the locality, one might expect the same in case of the perceived influence of the site. However, in this respect the attitudes were very similar, ascribing to Facebook the status of a powerful tool that clearly influenced the election result in the locality. The majority of participants in both localities concurred that the power of Facebook comes from of its ability to engage either young people or “active” citizens who have the potential to influence their peers. Nonetheless, there were slightly different emphases regarding this, which, once again, followed the locality distinction.

In Pilsen (the large city), the emphasis was placed on the volume of political messages people were exposed to. An assumption of a cumulative effect lay beyond this approach: the more people are exposed to Facebook, the higher the chance it will shape their attitudes. The core of Facebook power thus was thought to arise from the potential to change preferences or favour; and this is said to be much more important in the case of Facebook than for other “older” media, since Facebook allows political messages to enter our private space (as mentioned earlier).

I think that the most important information is still found in newspapers or online; I don't think there are in-depth analyses of complicated issues. (...) But it (Facebook) has a power, a power to convince you. If you see four or five times a day the same faces from a particular party, I believe it influences you. You are then more likely to vote for them. (PLZF05, interview on 17 October 2014)

The most effective might be the frequency of messages because you see them all the time. (...) And you might have a feeling of having a more personal relationship with the candidate thanks to Facebook. That's it. This is more than a billboard. This is why I think Facebook was important. (PLZF12, interview on 17 October 2014)

Since the Facebook campaign in Nové Město na Moravě was weak, the exposure to Facebook was considered to have different consequences. Making people aware there would be an election and mediating information and debates about the campaign elsewhere in the Czech Republic, it was believed that the reason behind the influence of Facebook was its potential to “activate” people. In contrast with the “offline” campaign, Facebook, the participants thought, created a feeling that the upcoming election was of importance.

I personally saw much about the election, not here, but in other cities, on Facebook. And I think it is like a reminder: 'Hey, you, you can decide about the future of your city.' So maybe people were more interested in the election and eventually went to the polls. (NMF01, interview on 15 October 2014)

So in case of Nové Město na Moravě, Facebook was more perceived as it may have increased the willingness of people to vote. This goes along with the argument that the new media make people more active in many

areas of their social life. Conversely, this argument was not voiced by the participants in Pilsen, who tended to perceive Facebook much as they did other media, such as newspapers or television – i.e., as a one-directional channel with a rather passive audience.

Conclusions

As the data presented in the analysis suggest, the context is an important aspect of the evaluation of the role of new media platforms such as Facebook in political campaigning. There were considerable differences in the perception of the role of Facebook based on different expectations, which corresponded with different perceptions of its influence. Whereas in the large city of Pilsen, Facebook tended to be aligned with other communication tools and described as an amplifier of political messages that contributes to the overwhelming “media message”, in the context of the small city of Nové Město na Moravě, a more positive potential of the site was emphasized. In general, there seems to be a coherent social discourse about Facebook (Watts et al. 1999) that emphasizes the importance of the site in campaigns and its ability for proceeding interactivity. That points to the increasing reflection of the political role of Facebook by the electorate. However, when the actual use of Facebook in the campaign does not meet the expectations based on this social discourse, the site becomes a subject of disillusionment – in the case of Pilsen, due to poor interactivity of the campaign; in the case of Nové Město na Moravě, due to the factual absence of a Facebook campaign. It also shows that the use of Facebook in the campaign is considered as a standard (and demanded) part of the campaign, a sign of its professional administration, even where the citizens admit that there might be no added value to such involvement.

The two different campaign contexts also remind us that the contribution of Facebook to civic cultures may take various forms (c.f. Dahlgren 2013). The participants were well aware of the potential of Facebook (and social networking sites in general) for broader and more intensive democratic participation, yet, at the same time, the power of Facebook was ascribed rather to its ability to get into one’s private domain and the omnipresence of the political messages there. To put it differently, the source of Facebook’s influence is seen rather in a one-way, centre-periphery communication than in its potential for interaction. The case of Nové Město na Moravě also suggests that the awareness function (Hermida 2010) of social-networking sites may have larger consequences than anticipated thus far, at least in some special circumstances. Hermida (2010) emphasizes the importance of social networking sites as awareness systems for their contribution to knowledge. In this particular case, even something less than peripheral knowledge was important: it was the feeling that something important was going to happen. As Stephen Coleman (2013) shows in his phenomenology-rooted inquiry, already this “feeling” can mean a lot for the motivation to participate in the elections. Thus, also this subtle influence of Facebook should not be underestimated.

Finally, although I refer to the communication context when comparing the two localities and the participants themselves often mentioned other communication sources for explanation of their perception of Facebook, we should bear in mind that the “context” involves much more than only the communication channels. There is the whole complexity of relationships between particular social actors as well as other elements, such as the current social mood, the existing experience with local politics, the socio-economic conditions of the people in a particular locality, among other factors. Tracing the influence of these factors on the perception

of Facebook is far beyond the scope of this paper. Referring to the communication context seems reliable in this case, precisely because Facebook is evaluated within the context of a communication infrastructure. Nonetheless, the other factors should be taken into account to avoid a reductionist, media-centric view of the situation.

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