

Social Media and its Role for Cypriot Members of Parliament in Times of Crisis

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Abstract

Social media are becoming progressively more important in the role they play in any organisation's marketing and client-base development platform, performing a strategic function in providing information sources for everyone. Recently, for instance, microblogging services such as Twitter, along with social networking sites like Facebook, are reputed to have the potential for increasing political participation nationally and internationally. In times of crisis, social media offer a different approach to stimulate citizen engagement in political life, reshaping creative structures and methods of contemporary political communication in the way that politicians and citizens can interact with one another. The goal of this study is to investigate the current role of the social media used by Members of Parliament and politicians to reach, communicate and network with their audiences (citizens), or groups of people, in times of political change and crisis in Cyprus. A qualitative study is adopted using face-to-face interviews in order to explore the views, experiences, beliefs and motivations of individual participants in Cyprus.

Keywords: New media, social media, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, online communication, political communication, strategic change, Cyprus, parliament

Introduction

Social media may embrace political parties or politicians to promote their image and political messages, and this capability has prompted major changes to the style of political communication used before. In the immediate past, social media are reported to have impacted the public discourse and communication in society (Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan, 2012). In Cyprus, the newly discovered media resources chosen by politicians and Members of Parliament (MPs) such as blogs, websites, Facebook, Twitter, Google Plus, YouTube and so on, verify a two-way discursive identity that contributes to the customising of the political arena.

At the time of writing, results on the sites of the most popular social media networks worldwide indicate that Facebook is the first social network to surpass 1 billion registered accounts, Google Plus has 343 million active users, Twitter has over 284 million monthly

active users, and Tumblr has more than 230 million active blog users (Statista, 2015). Given the tremendous growth of social media, particularly Twitter and Facebook, these instruments of communication are being utilised more and more in a partisan context by citizens, MPs and political institutions alike. Since 2008, this medium appears to have assisted active participation in political communication especially during election campaigns in Cyprus.

The island of Cyprus has been undergoing an economic crisis in recent years. The financial crises in the USA and in Europe, together with the global processes of social and economic change, have contributed to a large degree to the economic and political situation in Cyprus. The financial watershed in Cyprus involved the exposure of Cypriot banks to overleveraged local property companies, together with the Greek government-debt crisis, the downgrading of the Cypriot government's bond credit rating to junk status by international credit agencies (Moody's; Standard and Poor), and the weakness of the government to restructure the troubled Cypriot financial sector. The ramification is that Cyprus was unable to raise liquidity from the markets to support its financial sector, and requested a bailout from the European Union (Annual Report, 2013).

More specifically, on 25 March 2013, a €10 billion international bailout by the Eurogroup was announced in return for Cyprus agreeing to close the country's second largest bank, the Cyprus Popular Bank (Laiki), in addition to imposing a one-time bank deposit levy on all uninsured deposits, and converting 47.5% of deposits exceeding €100,000 in Bank of Cyprus to equity in order to recapitalise the bank (*ibid.*).

Social media have at length been using the above debacle in a political context. With the changing politics in Cyprus, MPs and politicians have found different ways of reaching out to their audiences: embracing the social media to encourage their publics by informing, persuading, and promoting their interactivity. The aim of this study is to explore the current role of social media adopted by MPs and politicians to reach, communicate and interact with their audiences (citizens), or groups of people in times of crisis and political change in Cyprus. It is expected that communication between the majority of MPs and society members will move to a virtual environment as people use social media more actively.

In the move to promote 'self' or enhance political groups on social media there is a need for organisations to implement guidelines in order to safeguard their present competitive positions during the change implementation process (Longenecker, Neubert and Fink, 2007; Franken, Edwards and Lambert, 2009). Agrawal, Budak and El Abbadi (2011) suggest that the process by which people locate, organise, and coordinate groups of individuals with similar interests, and the ability to solicit and share opinions and ideas across various topics have all undergone dramatic change with the rise of social media.

The private sector has long recognised this media's potential as a route for influencing consumers, and many professionals are aware of the power at its disposal as an advocacy

tool. In the current changing economic environment countless organisations are undergoing some type of change or are facing economic crises. These periods of adaptive change are often characterised by radical modifications (Schildt and Sillince, 2012).

Because of the far-reaching effects of information technologies and social media sites like Facebook and Twitter, the role of new information technology in politics has been kindled in the area of political communication and attention is focused on what it offers. Early researchers support that the label 'social media' has been attached to the growing number of Web 2.0 websites or services whose content is primarily user-driven, hence the targeting of interactivity between users such as blogs, social network sites, micro-blogs (i.e. Twitter), and digital media sharing formats (Agichtein, Castillo, Donato, Gionis and Mishne, 2008). Today, almost every Cypriot politician has a Twitter or a Facebook account or both, and many employ specific staff or even social media consulting companies to maintain such accounts.

Social media may be used to effect change in a variety of ways, from shifting consumer behaviour to strengthening a citizen's commitment to voting. This medium first made an appearance in Cyprus in the 2008 presidential elections but a more notably intense and heavy application was made in 2011 during the parliamentary elections. Following on from that point we have several examples of politicians who employed social media which played a crucial role during the presidential elections in Cyprus in 2013 – Nicos Anastasiades, Stavros Malas and Giorgos Lillikas – who, via their official Twitter and Facebook accounts, responded to questions posted by users of social networking services. It is worth mentioning that Cyprus is ranked as one of the top thirty countries with the highest rate of Facebook users per capita, estimated at 520,000 users in a country of 838,897 inhabitants (EworksWSI, 2014).

As Internet technology evolves and is adopted, there is a strong thrust in the literature gains in technology (Nicoli and Komodromos, 2013); more specifically it allows politicians to engage in the same tried and true behaviours via social media channels (Druckman, Kifer and Parkin, 2010). Researchers confer that social media have the potential to powerfully and significantly affect political knowledge formation, and the individual's view of the world (*ibid.*). Often, as a result, the show of disapproval of communication in social media implies a fundamental change in traditional public communication, which has usually been exclusively initiated and managed by politicians, political parties and other organisations as well as journalists (Chadwick, 2006).

The uses of social media in a political framework are rising steadily in Cyprus. The potential of this networking method appear to be most promising since it empowers active participation and democracy. As an illustration, a recent study by Larsson and Moe (2011) reveals that Twitter was employed during the 2010 Swedish general election and served as a channel for disseminating political content. Twitter users are more likely to interact with others who share the same views as themselves in terms of retweeting.

Furthermore, they can actively engage with others with whom they disagree, and the upshot is that interactivity is encouraged.

Political communication has become a major focus in the growing field of social media studies. Nonetheless, in political communication from Cypriot politicians toward their publics, little is known about the role of social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter. By means of the conceptual lenses of information technology and social media networks, this paper considers the current role of the social media networks used by thirteen MPs (government) and politicians to reach, communicate and interact with their audiences (citizens), or groups of people, in times of strategic political change in Cyprus. The study is based on a qualitative study (face-to-face interviews) so that the views, experiences, beliefs and motivations of individual participants in Cyprus are examined. The researcher conducted thirteen in-depth interviews with MPs in Nicosia.

Communication and Technology

Noveck (2009) suggests that the Internet advocates have traditionally claimed that the World Wide Web (www) can potentially improve democratic practices by connecting citizens through virtual networks and communities of interest, and in this way the users can participate in collaborative platforms that facilitate increased information flow and diversity of opinion. This may help government decision-making to be more expertly informed and democratic. Additionally, advances in technology create great opportunity for Public Relations practitioners: 'A fundamental reason why public relations practices exist today is the loss of community resulting from the new means of communication and transportation ... especially the escalating development of technology, multiculturalism and globalism' (Kruckeberg and Starck, 1998, p. 11).

Scientific literature emphasises that qualitative and effective communication of business organisations with target groups is one of the most important factors which helps businesses to compete in the market successfully (Jucaityte and Mascinskiene, 2014). Communication is one of the main resources employed to form public opinion, and this is supported by the participants in the study. Kotler, Armstrong, Saunders and Wong (2003) propose that every organisation eager to reap the best results from a communication process must harmonise interdependently all the marketing elements, including which social media tools and techniques to use for these make up a part of it too. Estanyol (2012) argues that social media is a broad term that often defines something which is not attributed to traditional media. It is a tool of the World Wide Web which enables users to become active creators of the content in order to communicate with one another effectively, and generate and exchange varied information (Garnyte and Perez, 2009). This is how present day MPs use social media to express their political, individual and personal attitudes, opinions, and reviews.

Online communication began with the introduction of the Internet in the 1990s. When the Web 2.0 started to develop in the mid-2000s, people discovered that they could form groups much easier. They could share knowledge and experiences with others around the world as well as share photographs and videos, and this altered the communication balance – people were able to form groups and actually influence an organisation. Since the technical development of Internet e-mail and the World Wide Web, the two-way communication has been made simpler, less time-consuming and more cost effective. It might be interpreted thus: ‘as technology develops, PR needs to move ever closer to the “excellence” model – two way symmetrical communication’ (L’Etang, 2008, p. 64), because the advances in technology facilitate exchange of information from organisations with their publics to effectively receive more feedback.

Breakenridge ably describes that Web 2.0 is no longer simply about good communication but about finding the path to conversations. ‘Traveling this path will enable you to directly reach and communicate with the people who will influence decisions and ultimately carry the brand forward, which ultimately leads peer to peer influencer driven customer loyalty’ (Breakenridge, 2008, p. 261). At present, the focus of the role of communication is in relationship building wherein communication is managed by public relations practitioners to cultivate healthy alliances between organisations and stakeholders (Komodromos, 2014).

Many researchers argue that public relations facilitate dialogue by establishing channels and procedures for dialogic communication to take place: Online communication, in particular, is an ideal venue for fostering dialogue. Scholars suggest that organisations and government have an opportunity to build dialogic relationships with their publics through the use of strategically designed websites (Rybalko and Seltzer, 2010). Golden (2011) strongly emphasises that in order to succeed in social media, communication practitioners have to respect the aversion of the community to advertising, PR spin, and blatant self-promotion, therefore, practitioners should adopt the approach that the online community respects: usefulness, authenticity, altruism, and validation from outside parties. ‘Social media are not just the tools or the mediums, for they could not exist without their users – not a nameless, faceless TV or radio audience, but real people with whom relationships are possible’ (Golden, 2011, p. 4).

Social media experts highlight the need to listen to, and be aware of the desires, interests, and needs of diverse publics. This is essential in order to be able to produce marketing and communication programmes that enable the different publics to play a much more active role (Estanyol, 2012). As Argenti and Barnes (2009) suggest:

‘companies must invest resources to establish an intimate understanding of their stakeholders’ identities and preferences, a clear picture of the innovations that will

enhance their brand identities in a digital context, and a thorough awareness of the risks and challenges that could derail even the sturdiest of business strategies' (p. 58).

Bortree and Seltzer (2009) reveal that neither traditional online tools such as corporate websites, nor social networking tools such as Facebook, have been employed to their full dialogic potential. Rybalko and Seltzer (2010) suggest that websites and social networking sites provide useful information to the public and are easy to use, but they do not fully realise the dialogic potential of online tools. The authors report that although previous studies examine how organisations use online communication to facilitate dialogic communication with publics and demonstrate that organisations are using technical and design cluster principles, they are still not fully utilising the dialogic cluster.

The Role of Social Networks

As technology develops, it is necessary for public relations to move ever closer to the 'excellence' model – two way symmetrical communication (L' Etang, 2008). It could be argued that the model is normative and 'idealistic' rather than reflecting the conditions in the world where public relations operate (p. 64). Nevertheless, technological development provides innovative opportunities for organisations and their publics to practice two-way communication, thus enabling people to engage in the transmission of messages more efficiently and effectively so that appropriate feedback is retrieved. This ongoing expansion in technology has become part of human life.

The progress of technological advancements has created an imaginative and ultra-modern world with new-fashioned values and experimental methods that have led to the revaluation or to the revision of relationships between people. Konijn, Utz, Tanis and Barnes (2008) explain that although a great deal of interpersonal communication is now mediated by technology, the new ways of communication such as computer-mediated technologies in chat rooms, weblogs, virtual group work, sms, and others can sometimes facilitate or impede communication and can alter interpersonal interactions (p. 3).

Due to the technology boom, communication is still the key to building relationships and finding solutions in various fields. Brown (2009) implies that it is 'more significant than the introduction of the printing press' (p. 1). Breakenridge (2008) adds that social media is 'anything that uses the Internet to facilitate conversations between people' and refers back to the 'two way' approach of PR that Ivy Lee discussed in his day. It is about listening and, in return, engaging people on this level. It forces PR to stop broadcasting and start connecting.

'Monologue has given way to dialog' (Breakenridge, 2008, p. 128). A number of researchers put forward the notion that if politicians prefer to be involved and aware of how technology progresses – and more specifically with online communication – then all

they need to do is become a faithful follower and enter the dialogue in their own way. Following on from this, Brown (2009) argues that:

‘changes are taking place in the way we use the media channels that have been available to us for many years. Totally new communications channels are emerging. The PR practitioners of the 21st century must understand all of them and how they are controlled and influenced if they are going to adapt and survive in this new environment’ (p. 4).

Other researchers such as Haenlein and Kaplan (2010) concede that social media is a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, which allow the creation and exchange of user generated content. They also acknowledge that the growing availability of high-speed internet access further adds to the popularity of the concept, leading to the creation of social networking sites such as MySpace (in 2003) and Facebook (in 2004), and the aptly coined term ‘social media’, which contributes to the prominence it has today (pp. 60–61). The traditional way of communication has transformed. It is changing endlessly and will continue to fluctuate throughout people’s lives.

In political communication the consequence of online communication is vital in times of strategic change. Online communication has recently been used successfully by political parties, MPs or candidates in their campaigns as the Internet is an expedient and powerful tool. It offers an opportunity to political parties or candidates to search for data at any time or place, wherever they are, making it possible not only for politicians to give advice or exchange ideas, but also to influence floating or absent voters as to how they might vote. In light of the benefits the Internet may provide, new communication platforms have been created on all channels where consumers, the media, celebrities and different organisations can interact.

Moreover, journalists see the need for posting less formal and more personal opinions through their blogs to effectively and efficiently convince their audience. The role of the media in political campaigns is important because publics (possible voters) may be influenced by them. Media are often perceived as representatives because their decisions affect the population as a whole. It is vital to focus on suitable audiences, at the proper time through the use of the relevant media.

Today, whether the emphasis in social networks is on Facebook or on immediate information via Twitter, social media offers new opportunities to link supporters and voters directly. With this in mind, the newer forms of media provide a good case to study (i.e. Twitter, Facebook, or other social-networking sites), particularly in relation to the role of social media used by Cypriot MPs and politicians in their ambition to reach their audiences in times of strategic change. How does this new technology as used by political members work? Who uses social media and why do some MPs and politicians utilise more

social media networks than others and why do some do neither? Additionally, this paper aims to explore the electoral motivations, if any, as regards adoption and use of social media networks by Cypriot MPs and politicians. It is to these questions that we now turn in our attempt to find parallels in the outcome of this study.

Methodology

A qualitative research methodology has been selected for this study in order to facilitate the interpretation and understanding of the phenomena that may emerge from the in-depth interviews conducted. In all, nineteen MPs were contacted either by telephone or in person and invited to participate in the study; however six of them declined to partake for personal reasons. Thirteen MPs and politicians from Cyprus constituted the units of analysis for this study, the objective being to replicate findings across cases. The aggregate number of thirteen in-depth face-to-face interviews is an acceptable number for this qualitative multiple-case study (Patton, 2002).

Data was collected using purposive sampling through individual, in-depth interviews which were semi-structured. That said, this particular research strategy may be useful in illustrating and determining areas for future research. The in-depth interviews took place in November 2014 with a fixed selection of participants who were interviewed to generate responses. A qualitative approach was chosen given that the aims of this study were primarily related to questions of ‘how’ and secondly to ‘the extent of use’. A further reason for the qualitative focus was the dearth of qualitative research in this area.

Research Results

Data for the study was collected through individual, in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Evaluations of the findings have been provided and focus on participants’ responses to the following semi-structured interview questions that were used in this study:

Q1: How can social media improve communication and interaction between you and your publics/followers?

Most of the participants agreed that social media has changed the way politicians communicate with their publics/followers. Nine of them suggested that a micro-blogging tool such as Twitter will undoubtedly be transformed or replaced within the near future because it is only convenient in a world of messaging typed on very small keyboards. Three participants noted that Twitter’s 140 characters could be replaced by 140 words without difficulty. All thirteen respondents noted that social media can be viewed as one method of recruiting, motivating, and empowering supporters.

Social media makes it much easier to spread the word concerning events, schedules

and current events in the political environment as well as dealing with important talking points. Four of the respondents confirmed that interactivity is encouraging via social media, and added that it is more than welcome for their followers on Twitter or their friends on Facebook to agree or disagree with their posts. Using this they can begin a dialogue via social media with their friends and followers. Ten of the respondents added that because of the tremendous political and economic changes that have taken place in Cyprus over the past two years, social media are used by politicians and MPs in order to focus on relationship building via dialogue as well as a long-term world views on what is currently happening in Cyprus, in addition to the relationship or any political changes between Cyprus with other nations.

Six of the participants reported that effective communication and interaction between their publics can be improved via social media but only when users of social media – and in this case politicians and MPs – understand the new rules of the social media ‘world’. They went on to state that using social media to engage the different publics, people want to have a meaningful dialogue, promote engagement and involvement in the process, and especially in times of strategic change in the political ‘arena’, to increase their personal interactions with others and be listened to. Four of the respondents suggested that communication is improved considerably with social media since it promotes two-way conversation, and often a multidimensional conversation. Seven of the respondents remarked that it had been noticeable following the various political changes that had taken place in Cyprus, that people were very frustrated and anxious, and that social media helped them to engage more with their politicians and MPs which, in turn, encouraged contributions and reactions from their publics.

Furthermore, two of the participants suggested that the key to explaining the power of social media, especially in times of strategic political change, is ‘to encourage participation’, meaning that social media can solicit an interaction, positive or negative, by making it uncomplicated and straightforward to contribute. Nine of the respondents reported that social media promotes an exchange of information between them and their audiences by inviting participation, and trying to create a quick and simple collaborative platform which requires information that is organised and communicated by them. Seven of the respondents added that social media allowed them to speak directly to their publics/voters with no additional expenditure, and also permitted politicians to circumvent the traditional method of reaching voters through paid advertising or earned media.

In addition, five of the participants noted that Twitter and Facebook have become instrumental in managing (in a way) the communication between their publics in times of political change, because they allow like-minded supporters (or voters) and activists to easily share news and information with each other such as campaign events. This

phenomenon was revealed during the latest presidential elections campaign in 2013 in Cyprus. Eight of the respondents said that social media tools can improve communication as well as maintain effective interaction with their publics which they considered to be a good thing, expressly when they request feedback from voters or constituents. On the other hand, three of the participants said that feedback can be a very bad thing depending on how politicians respond. There are some politicians and MPs that hire staffers to monitor their social media channels for negative responses and to clear anything that they consider to be of little importance to answer, or they never give an answer to people who ask questions.

Finally, eleven of the participants strongly advocated that communication and interactivity via social media, if monitored effectively on an everyday basis, will engage the public regardless of whether the feedback is negative or positive. Five of the respondents agreed that the social media tool allowed Cypriot citizens to easily join together to petition the government and their elected officials, leveraging their numbers against the influence of the House of Representatives, lobbyists and monied special interests. Two of the participants said that communication and interactivity via social media is powered because it allows like-minded citizens to join together in ways that will be equally as powerful.

Q2: Which social media have you used for political communication and why did you choose to use those specific ones?

All thirteen respondents agreed that the use of social media became a feature of political engagement, especially after the political change that took place in Cyprus after 2012. Nine participants use Twitter on a daily basis, 'tweeting' on average 2–3 times a day to their followers. On the other hand, all participants use Facebook as their main social media tool, suggesting that via Facebook they try to increase political participation characterised by this technological innovation, offering rich user experience and multimedia content dissemination. Seven of the respondents noted that using Facebook can be described as a way of facilitating people to engage directly and interactively with audiences.

Seven of the participants advised that they use Facebook and Twitter because of the characteristics of sharing of content, online collaboration, the socialisation among people, networking, user generating content, and especially in times of political change, the social media offer opportunities to positively increase dialogue between people. Four of the participants reported that they use social network sites as well as blogging, Twitter, Facebook and YouTube because they can individualise and personalise campaigns, messages, and, as politicians or MPs, they have greater autonomy due to a more direct and intense approach to communication. Six of the respondents reported that social media contributes to the destabilisation of political communication systems and offers new

opportunities for interactivity, allowing for symmetrical relations and more social control. Seven of the respondents stated that the use of Twitter has helped to improve their political communication because the information can be transmitted rapidly to their audiences, without interference from traditional media, and their audiences have better access to political information.

Three of the participants advocated that using both Facebook and Twitter offered more options for direct and interactive communication with citizens, plus individuals could select and filter information based on their interest. Another three respondents added that Twitter offers more engagement of citizens in the political process and at the same time provides more opportunities to communicate ideas, suggestions and exchange of information. Six of the participants said that they use YouTube, Facebook and Twitter because – for their political communication – these social media have managed to ‘democratise’ political participation, particularly in times of political strategic change, as in the case of Cyprus, and citizens are now able to interact easily with their political representatives, as well as monitor, provide suggestions, or criticise their work. Nine of the participants added that this creates transparency, which is what publics are desperately looking for in periods of strategic political change. Only two of the participants said that they mostly use Twitter as their main social media tool because it helps them to profile themselves better and they can respond straightforwardly to their followers, providing better and frequent interaction with them to promote trust, increase their popularity, and their influence on them.

Q3: What does interactivity mean for MPs and politicians in the context of their political communication practice?

MPs and politicians defined interactivity in different ways, the common ground being the use of the term relationship. Eight of the respondents noted that interactivity between politicians and their publics/voters mainly concentrated on the interests-focused relationship, which is pitched at individual objectives and orientates toward the maintenance and strengthening of the relationship between politicians and their publics. Four of the participants added that interactivity essentially helps them in creating more effective campaign strategies, particularly in the case of elections. Five of the participants endorsed that their aim is to encourage dialogue orientation via social networks in the context of their political communication practice plus encourage participation because they want to demonstrate to their publics that they are listening to their concerns and are willing to collaborate with them.

Additionally, two of the respondents reported that the Cypriot government must realise the importance of the Internet and other new media tools in promoting their public diplomacy efforts. MPs together with politicians should also be familiar with the

features of the new media and include them as part of their current political communication practice. Eight of the respondents suggested that in this new environment, political communication has become more personalised due to the fact that Cyprus is still undergoing strategic political change. Social networking, blogging, micro-blogging and other new media tools can give citizens the opportunity to communicate directly with MPs or politicians, and provide the opening for them to share their experiences and information through an effective virtual connection and interaction.

Q4: What kind of information do MPs and politicians read or use via social media tools such as Facebook or Twitter, in their political communication?

All participants in the study reported that they often use Facebook and Twitter to search for political information from other political parties. Sometimes they read humorous content related to politics or watch a political video. Seven of the respondents countered that they use Facebook to forward to, or share political information with their publics (friends on Facebook), or search for information on a Facebook political profile page. Nine of the participants noted that they post political information on their profile page, and sometimes even post a 'like', message or a comment on someone else's message on their own political party or profile page. Seven of the respondents agreed that the share and use of information via their personal profiles on Facebook or Twitter has an influence on the turnout, and in the long term it may affect the outcome of elections.

Twelve of the respondents replied that publics in Cyprus are increasingly connecting with politicians and MPs through new media technologies, and that both Facebook and Twitter can be used in election campaigns as a means of informing voters and engaging stakeholders. Four of the respondents reported that Twitter simulates word of mouth marketing and dramatically improves audience reach, serving also as a framework for discussion. Six of the participants added that Twitter's potential efficiency in voter engagement can become very effective when they share video links or tweets that can open a direct dialogue with their followers, stating that online relationship management success is largely dependent on fulfilling the information needs of the stakeholders. Moreover, three of them added that social media does help them in promoting their image and political message, thus ensuring active participation of their supporters on Facebook and Twitter at the same time.

In addition, twelve of the respondents reported that providing extra information to key publics through Twitter can inform and engage the supporters of candidates, especially during election periods. Most of the respondents supported the idea that Twitter and Facebook have been credited for their ability to quickly gather, connect, and engage people of common political goals and aspirations, particularly throughout the past two years when Cyprus has experienced strategic changes in the political environment.

Videos, photos, and links that create a 'buzz' for political discussion, form the basic information shared or read by participants via social media. Eight of the participants strongly supported the idea that Twitter was used as an alternative avenue of participatory politics and gave Cypriots a sense of empowerment in March 2013 when the Eurogroup agreed to bailout the Cypriot economy. All thirteen participants in the study noted that Twitter can be used to foster two-way communication with political publics, to engage with publics and develop strong relationships with politicians and MPs. As a consequence, positive relationships should translate into increased support at the polls during elections.

Conclusion

As previous studies have shown, social media have, in recent years, become an important political communication channel (Haenlein and Kaplan, 2010; Agrawal, Budak and El Abbadi, 2011). Social networks and other forms of interactive communication are repeatedly portrayed as quite revolutionary in the political communication of MPs and politicians in Cyprus during periods of change in the political environment. What is more, political activities might gain more transparency, and citizens become more involved in the political decision-making processes. Social media enables MPs and politicians to directly interact with their voters, and together the aim is to make honest and forthright discussion visible so that citizens are able to understand and embrace methods of policymaking.

This research has probed the current role of social media adopted by MPs and politicians in Cyprus with the aim of reaching out, communicating and interacting with their audiences (citizens), or groups of people, in times of strategic political change. Social media are considered to be an influential political communication channel in Cyprus, and globally.

This qualitative study has been undertaken using face-to-face interviews with thirteen participants so that their views, experiences, beliefs and motivations may be examined. The focus of the study is on how MPs and politicians currently use social media in the context of their work practice, in times of strategic change in the Cypriot political environment.

Despite the limited geographical reach of this fieldwork, the outcomes resonate with research carried out in other countries, which conclude that MPs and politicians use social media tools in order to connect with citizens interested in politics, raise the level of engagement, encourage dialogue orientation via social networks in the context of their political communication practice, boost participation to demonstrate that they are listening to the concerns of their publics and are willing to collaborate with them (Haenlein and Kaplan, 2010; Stromback and Kioussis, 2011). Most notably, this study determined that both Facebook and Twitter, currently used by MPs and politicians in

Cyprus, are effective tools for political communication, offering a powerful way to support political goals associated with influencing outcomes in elections.

Considering the ultimate goal of politicians to gain as many voters as possible in presidential or parliamentary elections, these findings provide campaign strategists and political public relations professionals with some evidence that social media tools like Facebook and Twitter, or YouTube and blogs, yield benefits that may help achieve such goals (Grant, Moon and Grant, 2010). The findings also indicate that social networking, blogging, micro-blogging and other new media tools can provide citizens with the opportunity to communicate directly with MPs or politicians and share their experiences and information through an effective virtual connection and interaction, which is on offer by the relatively new media (Nicoli and Komodromos, 2013).

Perhaps the most important insight, however, is that MPs and politicians use social media to engage with the different publics, and thus create a meaningful dialogue, promote engagement and involvement in the process, as well as help to increase the personal interactions with others and indeed listen to one another too in times of strategic change in the political environment (Noveck, 2009; Komodromos, 2014). The outcome reveals that on the Internet, MPs and politicians must continuously keep attention alive, and communicate constantly with their publics.

If users do not communicate, it means that they have nothing to say, so they must create content to publish in their social media networks. Survey results corroborate that microblogging services (e.g. Twitter) and social network sites (e.g. Facebook) are believed to have the potential for effective political communication (Stromback and Kioussis, 2011). Results also signify that while Twitter can be considered an ideal platform for users to disseminate information in general, political opinions can be posted publicly through their networks too, and Facebook pages or groups have started to be used additionally for the purpose of boosting interactivity with publics and entering into direct dialogues with citizens. With these innovative approaches, more political discussions are being encouraged.

The domino effect is evidenced by the fact that respondents are highly involved in online political communication through their Facebook profile pages or Tweeter accounts. Their aim is to increase interactive political communication for future campaign efficiency in the run-up to elections. Therefore, political parties ought to encourage their political members to create social media profiles and be actively involved in their use on a daily basis, since the possible benefits to be reaped in the future, specifically during an electoral campaign, can be very good.

In conclusion, this research is the first step toward understanding and discovering how MPs and politicians are currently using the social media networks for political communication in times of strategic change in Cyprus, and the door can be opened wider for further studies in this field which may offer more overarching and definite results by

implementing a quantitative study with more samples. Political activities or any kind of communication from MPs or politicians might gain more transparency and thus enable citizens to interact with them directly via social media. On a final note, supplementary studies incorporating research teams from different EU countries may well lead to broader and further conclusions that may be favourable not least for the political communication arena but for PR professionals as well.

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