Between analogue and digital: A critical exploration of strategic social media use in Greek election campaigns

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Abstract

Amidst the burgeoning literature on the use social media in electoral politics, there are still relatively few studies that seek to understand developments in digital campaigning from the inside. Drawing on nine semi-structured interviews with Greek political communication consultants, we address this gap. Theoretically, we draw from Kreiss et al.'s (2018) analytical framework that seeks to account for the ways that campaigns perceive their candidates in relation to *audiences*, *affordances*, and *genres* of different social media platforms, as well as the *timing* of the electoral cycle, in order to effectively study strategic social media communication. Our findings show that Greek campaigns are embracing many social media platforms but still have a relatively rudimentary understanding of the affordances of different platforms and their communicative cultures. Where campaign communication strategies are shaped by politicians, they typically favour one platform as a channel for all their content. Our findings demonstrate that different media systems and political cultures impact considerably on the adoption of digital communication strategies and can be quite far from the highly professional and sophisticated American model. Findings are discussed in relation to ongoing debates around campaign professionalisation and the role of platforms.

Keywords: digital political campaigns; political consultants; social media; interviews; political communication; Greece

Introduction

The shift to digital political communication ushered in what Jay Blumler (2013) describes as the fourth age of political communication, and is driven by an "ever-expanding diffusion and utilization of Internet facilities – including their continual innovative evolution – throughout

society". Research indicates that digital platforms have become a key if not *the* key tool for a range of campaigning contexts (e.g., Johnson & Perlmutter, 2010; Lilleker & Jackson, 2010). The widespread turn towards 'Web 2.0 campaigning' (Gibson et al, 2013; Lilleker & Jackson, 2010), allows parties and candidates to bypass the editorial control of traditional news media (Zittel, 2004) allowing them to directly reach large numbers of citizens with significantly lower campaign costs (Gueorguieva, 2007). Campaigns utilize a range of platforms, exploiting their specific affordances in line with patterns of user behavior.

Jungherr (2016: 374) argues that "To fully understand the impact of digital tools on campaigns requires that scholars move away from simply analyzing the political content campaigns post online and toward a focus on the embeddedness of digital tools in organizational structures and practices". Accordingly, there is now a growing body of research based on insider accounts of campaigns that look at social media and digital strategy across platforms in a holistic way (Karpf, 2016; Kreiss, 2014; Kreiss et al., 2018; Stromer-Galley, 2019). Our analysis builds on the conceptual framework by Kreiss et.al (2018), which draws attention to the increasingly disaggregated social media strategies of US digital campaigns. In contrast to the abundance of scholarship in the U.S.A where the use of new media technologies is highly advanced and awarded significant resources (Lilleker & Jackson, 2010; Bimber, 2014), we recognize the relative paucity of research within countries where digital campaigning is less embedded. Drawing on interview data with political consultants in Greece, our research offers an in-depth examination of their perceptions, motivations, and practices of the strategic use of social media in the under-researched region of Southern Europe, which offers insights into digital campaigning operations in a different media and political system: i.e. within a multiparty democracy where traditional media and face-to-face campaigning prevails. These perspectives, we argue, are important for the purpose of theory building beyond the cases of the US and northern Europe.

Strategic disaggregation of social media

Research on digital campaigning has shown US presidential elections have become the most innovative in terms of strategically utilizing platforms to meet campaign objectives (Stromer-Galley, 2019) to the point where they play a pivotal role within electioneering (Hendricks & Schill,

2017). Elsewhere, however, digital campaigning represents little more than a "minor shift in politics as usual" (Lilleker & Vedel, 2013: 416) despite a significant body of research demonstrating a maturation of social media strategies in a range of democratic contexts that increasingly take account of the specific affordances, cultures and audiences of social media platforms (Bossetta, 2018; Jungherr, 2016; 2015).

In this respect political campaigns may have taken a more strategic and holistic view of the communication environment, and this may be due to the role consultants play. A recent survey of political consultants across 16 EU member states (Lilleker et al, 2015) looked specifically at the take-up and use of social media in comparative perspective. Here, consultants saw it as a priority to use all the platforms popular within a nation, with variances based on specific contextual issues within society and not the preferences of individual politicians. Hence European communication strategists suggest embracing a granular strategy for platform use. Facebook for awareness building and mobilization, Twitter to reach a more professional community, YouTube for persuading the less engaged (see also Larsson, 2016; Jungherr, 2016). Despite this shared strategic understanding, there remain divergences in practice suggesting that while strategists may have a clear sense of how platforms should be used, individual politicians are more likely to have personal preferences over adoptions as well as platform usage.

Hence understanding how political campaigns utilise social media requires more than a focus on platform *affordances* and reach, but the other elements that constitute the culture of a platform (its social networking and discursive norms, the size and diversity of its membership, its political culture) as well as the culture of differing political systems and of individual political actors. Taking this a step further, Kreiss et al. (2018) offer a conceptual framework for the systematic analysis of how campaign communications might differ across various social media platforms. This starts with the *candidate*: their public persona, their personal background, their potential electorate and levels of comfort with different platforms. It also includes the imagined *audiences* (Marwick & boyd, 2011) of each platform. As recent North American research has shown (Baldwin-Philippi, 2015; Karpf, 2016), campaigns are investing heavily in the collection and analysis of behavioral trace data about social media users, so as to better understand their audiences

and shape communicative strategies. Then, in addition to the aforementioned *affordances* there are platform *genres*: the norms and social conventions unique to various social media platforms. For example, while all platforms offer the affordance of visual communication, the communicative genre on platforms such as Instagram demands a more intimate form of visual storytelling than others. Finally, there is *timing* - how campaigns use social media platforms related to the timing of the electoral cycle and its various media events.

The dynamics of these considerations interact to shape digital political campaigns; to create messages that are appropriate to the candidate, the intended audience, the platform affordances and genres, sympathetic to the temporal context of the electoral cycle (Kreiss et al., 2018). A question, however, is the extent to which this framework applies outside of the US context - arguably the best resourced and most professionalized in the world. While US consultants are often global players, informing the strategies of political campaigns in a variety of other national contexts, local consultants are found better placed when applying practices to the specific domestic context. Hence, they play a crucial role in bridging understanding of technological innovations in a specific cultural context in which a party or candidate may operate.

The role of consultants

Consultants play an increasingly important and controversial role in election campaigning and are well placed to offer holistic insights on the inner workings of contemporary political campaigns and the individual and political cultures that shape usage. Research suggests there is a globalized industry involving key figures travelling from country to country exporting a fairly uniform model for electoral success (Johnson 2002; Plasser and Plasser 2002). Studies have described consultants as akin to magpies (Koc-Michalska et al, 2016), constantly borrowing new techniques from previously successful campaigns to give their clients an electoral advantage. Yet it is no longer a matter of transplantation, research shows when consultants import their practices they adapt to the contexts of a nation and the particular needs and character of a client (Lees-Marshment & Lilleker, 2012). Many consultants provide specialist services, such as big data analysis, micro-targeting, insight marketing and voter profiling. However, the most influential consultants are those who oversee the overall campaign strategy and its tactical implementation. It is their role to work on

the branding of the party or candidate, develop a clear plan across the timeframe of the election, set communication objectives, monitor results and recommend strategic changes in response to private and public polling data (Johnson, 2011).

The logic behind the employment of consultants is they bring necessary skills and knowledge to political campaigning that politicians lack. Hence it is suggested that the politicians' need for their help overrides any misgivings they have over the advice they give (Johnson, 2002). It has been argued that the relationship between consultants and their clients can at times be adversarial, with differences of opinion on tactics such as employing negativity (Cacciotto, 2017). Green (2012) shows that the use of digital tools and platforms is one where there are naturally competing visions, which chimes with the strategic designs campaigners make over whether they focus mainly on informing, mobilizing or interacting with visitors to their online platforms (Author et al, 2011). Whether these are strategic decisions agreed between the consultant and their political client or resulting from one side or the other imposing a modus operandi that leads to restraint or innovation is less clear from existing research. For example, there are hints that many politicians are digital immigrants who are reluctant to exploit the affordances of digital communication due to their lack of understanding (Metallo & Agrifoglio, 2015), while others are constrained by their perceptions of professional norms (Enli & Simonsen, 2018). Cacciotto (2017) recognises the enormous pressures consultants face in a digital age; however, there is minimal data on the extent that parties and candidates are one key source of pressure, with politicians demanding consultants get results while working within parameters in which they, the politician, are most comfortable.

Political communication and the use of new media technologies in Greece

Greece is a parliamentary representative democratic republic with a multi-party system. The Greek political culture has been characterized by a profoundly ingrained clientelism that permeates the media sector as evident in the shared, vested interests of politicians, media and business, where media function as the means through which these interests are played out (Leandros, 2010). Similar to other southern European countries, Greece belongs to the Mediterranean or Polarized Pluralist Model, according to which mass media are strongly politicised (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). As such this study has relevant and important resonances beyond Greece.

Since 1980s, political communication in Greece has been characterized by the politicians' clear objective to earn greater visibility. Media, and more specifically television, assumed a central role in Greek politics and in political campaigning (Demertzis and Armenakis, 1999). Such developments highlighted an increasing need for communication professionals and as such signaled a major shift in political communication practices. Until the late 1980s, the use of communication professionals and political advertising were seen as malevolent, as tools to deceive people, and "parties using communication professionals were stigmatised" (Papathanasopoulos, 2007: 129). Despite this unfavorable environment, politicians sought professional guidance for their communication strategies by international experts as early as 1981 (Papathanasopoulos, 2007).

What is worth noting here, as evident in the post 2000 period, is that despite this shift towards a more professional communication approach, the so-called communication experts have primarily been party members whose knowledge of professional communication practices does not derive necessarily from some specialized political communication training but rather from their party-political experience. Although professionals (e.g., communication consultants, journalists, advertisers, pollsters) play a central role in political campaigning (mainly employed during the campaign period), their role has been complementary to the leader of the party and the party strategists (usually close affiliates of the leader 'of the day'), a situation that undermines arguments regarding the professionalisation of communication practices in Greece (Papathanasopoulos, 2007).

A limited but important body of literature focusing on the electoral periods from 2009 onwards has demonstrated that although online activity has gradually intensified,[1] specifically during pre-electoral periods, Greek parties and politicians are still using online platforms in relatively

[1] Recent data on politicians' social media use demonstrate that the majority of Greek MPs have a Facebook account (85,7%), followed by Twitter (69%) and 26,7% have an Instagram account (aboutpeople, 2018). However, these data cannot tell us if the accounts are active or what kind of activity takes place. Data on social media use in Greece displays Youtube's popularity with 79%, followed by Facebook (78%), Twitter (24%), and Instagram 33%, (Kalogeropoulos, 2018).

conservative ways (Mylona, 2008; Parisopoulos, et. al., 2012). More specifically, research on Facebook suggests that although politicians or parties are quick to adopt Facebook, their profiles are characterized either by inactivity or as a one-way, top-down tool for the promotion of their candidacy (Lappas, et.al., 2014). Along the same lines, Poulakidakos and Veneti (2016) showed that the use of Twitter by politicians in Greece was fragmented and instrumental with several propagandistic characteristics (such as unilateral views and affective language). Finally, research in the 2019 EU elections indicates that more Greek politicians have used Instagram primarily in order to construct and promote a positive self-image (Poulakidakos & Giannouli, 2019).

While these content analysis studies offer important benchmarks of platform adoption and use, they tell us less about the processes that lead to the embeddedness (or not) of digital tools in organizational structures and practices (Jungherr, 2016). In this study, we bring attention to the inner workings of political campaigns by asking two broad questions. First, following the framework of Kreiss et al. (2018), what explains the embeddedness of digital tools in Greek election campaigns with regard to candidates, audiences, affordances, genres and timing? And second, what is the specific role of political consultants in the shaping of Greek online campaigns?

Method

Between April-May 2018, nine interviews were conducted with political consultants (8 men and 1 woman) who held various positions, as owners or employees in communication consultancy companies (with multiple clients), and four were working for specific politicians (communication advisers) at the time we spoke to them (see Table 1). All were general political communication consultants for whom social media was a large (but not always exclusive) part of their responsibilities.

A purposive sampling strategy was initially employed to identify communication consultants with relevant experience in using social media in political campaigns with subsequent interviewees recruited through a snowballing method. The snowballing sampling was initiated through the researchers' personal contacts. Consultants involved in politics with experience in social media use is a very small market in Greece and could be easily identified. All of the consultants that we

approached accepted our invitation to be interviewed. The affiliations we include for consultants were valid at the time interviews were conducted (see Table 1).

Interviews were semi-structured with our emphasis on obtaining stories about their professional experiences of campaigning on social media, developments in the kind of use they make of the various platforms, and their relationship with their clients: the various political actors who seek their services. The examples on which our interviewees drew span across various electoral periods and campaigns.

All interviews were conducted face-to-face in Athens. Interviews typically lasted between one to two hours. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed in both Greek and English for the purposes of coding. The interview data was analyzed using a thematic analysis that allows for the contextual development of key themes, which inform the structure of our analysis through a process of coding, broader categorization, and conceptual mapping (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). Given the nature of interviewees, and the crucial balance with institutional research ethics, all names and specific job titles have been removed. Table 1 (below) displays the letters used to identify our interviewees in this text.

Identifier	Title	Campaigns	Gender
C-N	Director of Communication consultancy company, former communication consultant to PM	Multiple	Male
C-O	Director of Communication consultancy company	Multiple	Male
C-P	Director of Communication consultancy company	Multiple	Male
C-Q	Social media coms team member adviser	ND	Male
C-R	Social media strategist	SYRIZA	Male
C-S	Director of Communication consultancy company, former communication consultant to PM	Multiple	Female
C-T	Communication consultant, PR	Multiple	Male
C-U	Social media coms team member adviser	Kinima Allagis	Male
C-V	Communication adviser	SYRIZA	Male

Table 1: Interview subjects- Consultants

Findings and Discussion

Following the framework of Kreiss et al (2018), our findings are presented through a focus on candidates, audiences, affordances, genres and timing.

Candidates

Interestingly, when we asked our interviewees about the candidates, their understanding of the candidate's influence on strategy differed from the data in Kreiss et al.'s (2018) study. While in Kreiss et al. consultants focused primarily on the ethos, the public persona, and political biography of the candidate as the defining factors in shaping social media strategies, our interviewees focused on the candidates' skills and willingness to engage on social media. As obvious from our data, while candidates' personalities and unique characteristics need to be communicated, how or whether they are communicated is determined on their ability and will to use social media.

Similar to previous research (Vaccari, 2010), we found candidates vary both in their ability and willingness to exploit social media. Based on our data, we uncover two main types of social media users: innovators and conservatives. The first refers to those who embrace the use of one or more platforms and are fairly passionate innovators. As one consultant argued: "There are various politicians, […], who are social media addicts. Especially with Twitter because it is more direct." (C-U). Another consultant argues: "There are those who enjoy using Facebook a lot, but at times they overdo it with the things they post, both the content and the frequency" (C-N).

The second type refers to those who are more conservative and often constrained by a range of concerns. Those candidates tend to be less technologically savvy and share the range of fears and concerns identified in other studies (Metallo & Agrifoglio, 2015; Enli & Simonsen, 2018). While some are concerned about the additional work and support required, consultants highlight that they feel they are entering a hostile environment:

> "Politicians are afraid of social media. You can see that they have accounts during the last 3-4 years which they barely use because they are afraid to get involved in the harrowing procedure of using them..." (C-U).

> "We received so much abuse. From internet trolls paid by opponents, to various, supposedly indignant, citizens; from paid pages; and from real citizens who wanted to say their own thing. […] Do you know what it is like to have the page on your mobile and to keep receiving […] one after the other, messages and comments from people wishing you would die of cancer or to be found by rabid dogs, telling you *we'll burn you alive, you and your family, you traitor*… […]." (C-S).

Hence politicians seek to control their public image within digital environments. This often leads, as similar studies note (Cacciotto, 2017), to tensions between consultants and their clients. While some politicians use social media as a continuous broadcast feed, as one consultant argues: "Older people, who show themselves quite clumsy in the social media world, have sometimes a tendency to over share stuff and use hyperbole as a whole in their use." (C-V). Others barely use their accounts while preventing consultants from managing their profiles.

Consultants suggest age and candidates' perceptions about social media have a significant impact on their approach to social media use and so their relationship with consultants:

> "Politicians do not always listen to their communication consultants. There is a great difference with those politicians that are newcomers to politics. The latter are much more open to the use of social media because they understand that these are important for people and the journalists" (C-U).

Our interview data and the specific political context can help us better understand the different norms of use between US and Greek politicians. US politicians share an understanding that they need to use social media effectively, Greek politicians however have more divergent levels of digital skills and a varying willingness to engage with social media. While the lack of digital skills is a driver of reluctance to adopt digital platform use, where they see a necessity, they seek professional help, however the relationship with consultants can be fractious as often the politican does not trust the consultants and often display an overreliance on party members who act as advisers but lack specialized political communication training (Papathanasopoulos, 2007). Therefore, it is primarily their familiarity or not with the different platforms that dictates how

social media strategies are implemented. Moreover, budget and resources can differ dramatically between MPs, new politicians, party leaders and parties as a whole; differential resources impact on the digital services that can be accessed and the quality of support available.

Compared to the US and some European democracies, Greek politicians are also considered to be laggards by consultants. One consultant suggests "they only started using digital platforms in 2012 and only by 2019 had usage been systematized and turned professional […]" (C-R). While consultants shared knowledge of best practice from their work in other nations as well as with their corporate clients the practices were seen as alien within the Greek context. Consultants perceive numerous challenges when working with Greek politicians, as one argued:

> "one of the biggest problems with politicians in Greece, even today, is that they don't understand that technology is a strategy; they don't comprehend technology. And those who understand how different media work –their functions, their peculiar characteristics– they can't use that knowledge to form a strategy" (C-S).

One frequently cited example is consultants see each digital platform as different and argue there is no single social media strategy. They promote the tailoring of content to platforms: "I've personally tried to not have identical content on press releases and Twitter, even if we are tweeting something about which there is already a press release" (C-Q). But they argue even when a politician attempts to follow the norms of a digital platform, their communication style can appear alien to users. Hence consultants argue adapting to digital platforms is a steep learning curve for many politicians.

Therefore, consultants feel they must take responsibility for developing strategy as well as offering tactical advice. At the macro strategic level, it is a question of the role of different platforms.

> "There are still MPs around who do not have a website and use primarily social media. 'What do I want a website for, if I have Facebook? Who's going to visit my site?' And we try to explain to them that Facebook is the storefront from which we'll pull them into the main building: the website." (C-N).

Once platform use is set, the consultant then has to set "qualitative and quantitative goals, such as feeding in more content" (C-R). Hence the role is about assuming oversight of everything the politician plans to communicate and so a relationship of trust is crucial between consultants - with the technical knowledge - and politicians. However, consultants argue they are unable to have full control: "Sometimes it is not easy to do this job", one argues "we advise them but they also listen to their wives, their friends…" (C-T). Therefore, the politician may shop around for validation of their approach, perhaps if the consultant is critical, they may turn to those closer to them. Such behaviour resonates with Greek politicians' longstanding practice of resorting to party members and political comrades for campaign planning (Papathanasopoulos, 2007).

Moreover, while there is agreement over the importance of using platforms to perform different functions, there is disagreement over the content that should be prioritized and how to develop a persona within digital environments. Consistent with other studies (Kreiss et al, 2018), the consultants interviewed argued the strategy must align with the personality of the candidate, the political ideology, his or her distinctive features, and temperament. This should drive social media adoption and use. For example, talking about his client's Instagram use, a consultant stated:

> "His personality is not very conducive to all this. When we took up working for the Vice-President […] we weren't faced with the needs of a political rookie, say, who's taking the first steps into politics and needs to be re-elected in the future. We already had a brand there: from his physique to how he talks, or stands, or the things he does: there was no room for photo-ops there, he's not suited. So, we didn't bother" (C-R).

Compared to the culture of innovation in the U.S., (e.g., Kreiss el, al., 2018) Greek politicians are more cautious. While avoiding a purely technologically deterministic approach, we suggest a lack of familiarity with new technologies, primarily amongst older candidates, and the fear of trolling have shaped the conservative approach Greek politicians adopt when using social media. Moreover, the context matters. Studies on the adoption of the Internet in political communication in Greece have shown the slow integration of digital technologies into Greek political culture (Lappas et al, 2008). Interestingly a similar pattern of slower adoption and more hesitant use of SNS applications is also apparent in other countries of Central and Southern Europe. Czech

politicians admitted they opened their Facebook accounts more as a result of their consultants' persistence on this matter than by personal conviction. Furthermore, Mascheroni and Mattoni (2013) studying the 2010 Italian Regional elections, demonstrated variations in candidates' appropriation of convergence and participatory culture. Hence context inevitably impacts upon the implementation of strategic usage of social media in political communication and electoral campaigning.

Audiences

Similar to Kreiss et al (2018), all interviewees stated they have used different social media to appeal to different publics, and politicians should craft their messages accordingly so as to address the needs of the platforms and of the targeted audiences. Consultants argued that targeting audiences could be managed through variations in the form and content based on the candidate and the issue. Hence, based on their candidate's profile, each consultant develops a clear view of how to use a platform: "[...] You can maybe set the tone through Twitter but you build your community through Facebook" (C-R).

> "I personally argue against using Twitter for many politicians. Especially politicians who come from rural areas and their audience is this or that specific constituency where Twitter hasn't penetrated the market yet, it hasn't reached the voters– I tell them: it's a lost cause, you'll get in trouble for no reason. […] Facebook has 5 million accounts registered in Greece. Twitter, only 300,000. And most of them are in Athens" (C-N).

The above quote points towards some of the systematic components of media systems and political cultures with regards to the adoption of social media by politicians. Personal contact and mainstream media (especially TV) have long kept the sovereignty among modes of political communication in Greece, especially in the rural areas and smaller cities (which constitute the greater part of the country) (Papathanasopoulos, 2007). With a relative low number of Twitter users in these areas, Twitter in Greece becomes a tool primarily for those politicians who run in the larger cities of the country or for those who already hold senior political posts. Similar approaches to Twitter use can also be seen in the study of Di Fraia and Missaglia (2014) on the 2013 election in Italy, during which Twitter had a peripheral role when compared to mainstream

media and specifically TV. Moreover, personal contact still holds strong in countries with similar socio-geographical characteristics; Lisi (2013) argued that social activities, such as dinners and gatherings are prominent modes of communication among Portuguese politicians with their electorate.

While various studies have shown social media data analytics are extensively used by practitioners to know their audiences, and shape their communicative action (Kreiss et al, 2018:15-16), and consequently design their strategic digital communications (Baldwin-Philippi, 2015), our data reveal that the use of social media analytics for political campaigning purposes varies in sophistication based on the position of the politicians, their own personal interests and knowledge in data analytics and the resources available. Use also differs significantly between party and individual level. Overall, analytics are crucial to any contemporary political campaign for profiling, ad placement, and targeted communication (Bimber, 2014), and it has been obvious that Greek political consultants are aware of these functions. Some of our interviewees briefly also referred to the use of bots, trolls, and online strategies to push specific messages to target audiences.

Nevertheless, not all of them acquire the specialized knowledge to harvest these data, and in cases that their clients are equally ignorant, they make a minimal use of analytics:

> "We use FB analytics […] a fairly simple use of them like checking which are our audiences and how do they respond" (C-V).
>
> "We mainly look at the age groups. We use political research for other stuff. Surveys is a fetish in Greece" (C-U).

Moreover, as inferred by the above quote, politicians and consultants in Greece still rely heavily on opinion polls (and secondary qualitative research), rather than social media analytics, in order to tailor the messages to target audiences. The televised broadcasting of polls, that started with the first private channels in the early 90s, facilitated their absolute sovereignty in the Greek political field which still holds strong today (Mavris, 1999). What can be clearly argued is that political campaigning in Greece is characterized by the interplay between analogue and digital. Greece still

has a lasting legacy of analogue campaigning that to a great extent is deeply rooted in its political culture.

Affordances

"The concept of affordances relates to what various platforms are actually capable of doing and perceptions of what they enable, along with the actual practices that emerge as people interact with platforms" (Kreiss et al., 2018:19). Providing these platform affordances are understood, political campaigns must build social media strategies around the perceived electoral value of each platform for their candidate/ party.

Similar to other studies our interviewees see Facebook, compared to the other platforms, as a catch-all medium (Larsson, 2016; Lilleker et al., 2015). Given Facebook's widespread reach, and taking into consideration the strongly politicized and polarized Greek media system, our interviewees see this platform as an excellent opportunity to earn greater visibility for their candidates through bypassing mainstream media, and exploit the freedom of tailoring messages the way they want. They talked about the utility of page functionality, which allows for greater measurement of user data, and management of voter interactions:

> "A Facebook page gives you the possibility to have more than 5000 friends… You can run ads on it. You have better metrics. You have Facebook Page Insights –a real asset– which allows you to have a better grasp of the statistics, the analysis, the posts… Pages give you the possibility to be or not be followed without your necessarily having to interact with them. You are not friends. It's an entirely different relationship than the one with a user profile." (C-S)

Explicit here is the use of paid advertising through Facebook, an affordance that is shared with other social media platforms, but deemed particularly essential for Facebook given its algorithm changes. Looking back at the evolution of Facebook for political campaigning, one consultant told us:

> "Facebook was still social, literally, back then… it was a community. Today it's an advertising platform. Due to the various algorithms at work, a very small percentage of followers get to see the content of some pages … I might have 30,000 followers on my

> page–but I am only visible to 600 of them. I need to pay in order to increase my visibility. (C-S)

Not all platform affordances are utilized by all candidates, however. In explaining their use of Twitter and Facebook, one consultant said:

> "We do not get involved in any type of interaction or discussion. For instance, we just sent a Press Release following a meeting with an association to traditional media. […] It was then reproduced by her own social media, Facebook and Twitter." (C-V)

This quote is indicative of a traditional campaign mentality of top-down, one-to-many broadcasting, that has been demonstrated in other studies (e.g., Parisopoulos et. al., 2012; Poulakidakos and Veneti, 2016). But – as some of our participants argued – this non-use of an affordance is not always the result of personal shortcomings on the part of politicians, but also reflects the distribution of finite campaign resources. In this case, interacting with the public can cost a campaign human resource that could be better spent elsewhere, especially in a media system with strong analogue roots.

As with other elements of media strategy, the utilization of platform affordances by politicians is a source of frustration for some consultants. Typically, the source of this tension is the tendency of politicians to use each platform without discrimination, as these consultants explained:

> "[Anonymous politician's] Instagram is strictly political. In essence it is another version of Facebook. If you look at it you can see the same posts. She makes the same use just targeting different audiences. Most politicians use Instagram in the wrong way. Like it being another Facebook. On YouTube we mostly reproduce material from TV appearances let's say if you are in a political panel at a show." (C-U)

> "We have a YouTube channel with few subscribers. We do not use it much because the Minister wishes to have it more as an archive for her speeches which is somewhat boring. Instagram […] I use it mostly as she does not follow it and she doesn't know how it

functions. She prefers Facebook. We did not have a specific social media strategy. They acted as auxiliary to our communication plan". (C-V)

The popularity of Facebook (over the other platforms) which is found here among Greek politicians seems to be the case for other countries with a rather similar adoption of SNS like Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, and Italy (Seizov, 2017; Macková et al., 2017; Mascheroni & Mattoni, 2013).

Interestingly, it seems that YouTube was not considered as much a front-line communication platform, as it was only mentioned by some of the interviewees and in a peripheral way. In the majority of cases, YouTube is merely being used as an archive for videos. In the same vein, the interviewees did not refer to other platforms such as Snapchat.

Genre

Separate from affordances are the platform-specific norms, cultures and behaviors, which Kreiss et al. (2018) characterize as genres. These may be related to or facilitated by platform affordances, but are not equivalent to or wholly driven by them. Already evident in our findings is the appreciation (particularly amongst consultants) that different social media platforms require certain communicative styles in order to be effective with each platform's audience. As one consultant put it:

"On Facebook you get a wide audience. Facebook is akin to being on a very popular TV show or at a mass political rally. Twitter is more dialogue-like, like you're talking to a closed group of people around a table, people who understand more." (C-S)

In the following section, we therefore focus on two aspects of genre, personalization and interactivity.

Studies have already established how Twitter (Graham et al., 2017), Facebook (Larsson, 2016) and Instagram (Filimonov et al, 2016) are being used by politicians to reveal aspects of their personal life - from music tastes and sporting interests, to family life and intimate backstage

moments. A key question content analysis cannot answer is just how strategic this posting behavior actually is, and who is responsible for posting such content - the politician or campaign team?

From our interviews, personalization is seen as important for meeting the genre expectations of social media platforms, especially Facebook and Instagram. Consultants argue they look specifically for such content that can blur the personal and the political:

> "A large percentage of all posts are taken up by press releases, interviews, people's own articles … On Facebook and Instagram, you can also post some photographs from places you've visited. The ratio of personal to political photos is like 5%-95%, right? Most politicians post political photos. Not family photos etc. During election times I'll certainly throw a personal photo – relaxed, with friends and family – in the mix, too […] Or a picture of her daughter or son, when they're graduating […] posts accompanied with pictures do much better. Especially women: beautiful women are always a hit, right?". (C-N)

> "It is important that you also build the image of a normal person. On that note writing should also be quite loose at moments. Like out of the ten posts, have one that is more personal. Either related to family, a trip or a photo. Something that shows that you are an everyday man as well." (C-P)

Such testimony suggests that posting personal information is part of the package of services offered by communication consultants to their clients. Here, participants spoke particularly about the *visual* nature of personalized communication, which suits the norms of platforms such as Instagram.

> "The new reality is you have [people with] an attention span that's less than 6 seconds. So, you need to be really quick, you need to be visual […] your message should make an impression. You're working with impressions, not knowledge. People no longer read: they see. They scroll down until something catches their eye. […] you need to find a way to fully utilize images, […], to create a distinctive profile and be able to guide the user to your

> accounts, to steal them away from the other publishers, to bring them to your world, to your channels." (C-O)

Another genre norm native to social media platforms is *interactivity*. While it is driven by the interactive affordances of platforms, the types of interactivity and the audiences politicians interact with differ by platform norms. Twitter - described as a 'battlefield' by one consultant - is the platform Greek politicians spend the most time on. Here, politicians do interact, but constrained by a sense of fear about trolls, bots, and the culture of polarization and abuse that exists on the platform.

Perhaps related to this sentiment, most consultants we interviewed were used by politicians and their wider campaign team to manage these interactions. As analyses of political social media profiles have shown (Bossetta, 2018; Filimonov et al, 2016), these become controlled interactions, where possible, on the politicians' terms.

> "We discuss with the Minister and we decide who replies to messages. In many cases she responds by herself. On her Facebook page, we have activated the automatic reply. [...] Older people though prefer to call." (C-V)

> "He makes a statement through Twitter or through Facebook and that creates conversation, it's news, it can reach the 9 o'clock news of a major TV channel. And you can't possibly imagine what we receive in our inbox: demands for political favors, information, requests… There, you need to be able to judge whom you talk with… It's very dangerous to reply to someone you do not know." (C-N)

Part of this strategy of controlling interaction is to utilize the affordances of each platform. For Twitter, many politicians use the block function to deal with trolls. On Facebook, with its 'walled garden' architecture that *can* support tighter community building, participants spoke about being able to set the rules of exchange between voters and election candidates.

> "it was our stated policy that we'd allow no abusive language on our Page. Now if someone came in and started using such language, we wouldn't even have to send them a message

saying don't use abusive language. They'd simply be thrown out. […] Our answers were often purely informative. […]" (C-S)

Such findings illustrate how genre and affordances overlap, but it is also important to remember that while platforms share many of the same basic affordances such as replies, hashtags, shares, reactions, and blocking functions, there are still distinctive cultural norms that have evolved on each platform that often supersede affordances alone.

Timing

Timing was discussed as important for building support over a career as well as carefully timing posting (Kreiss et al, 2018), hence it can be separated into two aspects: firstly, the frequency of posting and secondly whether usage by politicians is exclusive to the electoral cycle. Consultants were keen to stress the importance of maintaining activity. "On an everyday basis, I would like to have two to three posts. Something of national interest but also something related to the interests of the specific electoral prefecture" (C-T). But frequency also needs balance "you should not make announcements the whole time or use it as a Press Office" (C-P). However, from the consultant's perspective all actions are geared towards building and maintaining public support. If electoral imperatives are not a factor then strategy is unimportant; for example, "we are not running a campaign here. Firstly, because he faces no challenge to being elected again. So, there's no stress [unlike for a] young politician who made it to Minister and wants to be re-elected" (C-R).

Similar issues concern the differences between the election period and the permanent campaign. For some consultants this leads to conflict with their political client, as one notes: "You see many politicians' profiles peak during the very last month of the electoral campaign and then they disappear. Most activity takes place during election time" (C-N). For this consultant it means generating content and 'going against the wishes' of the client. For others it is more a sense of frustration. "There are many politicians that are not preoccupied with social media through the year and they only think about them during the pre-electoral period. This is a big mistake" (C-P). But others offer a broader view. It is not simply about maintaining visibility but also about message consistency and salience. Firstly:

> "If you want to be seen, for example, as being the candidate who stands for three things – A, B, C– or the one who's fighting to change A, B, C, then a one-month campaign is not enough, it is not enough for your message to "stick". But in order for the message to stick "people need to be able to see the benefit". (C-S)

So, for this consultant "consistency and constancy" are key. Thus, timing combines discussions of frequency, balance across a political cycle and saliency.

Conclusion

Through the testimony of nine campaign consultants, this paper advances understanding of the embeddedness of social media platforms in political campaigning in a relatively under-explored but more globally comparable context: Greece. Following the analytical framework of Kreiss et al. (2018), we paid attention to candidates, audiences, affordances, genres and timing.

Beyond the findings relating to elements of campaign strategy detailed above, a number of over-arching and inter-connected findings emerge from our data. First, while we see a commitment to digital campaigning and evidence of increasingly disaggregated social media strategies – led by consultants – political use of social media among politicians of all levels in Greece still follows a largely conservative pattern of behavior. Findings showed how most politicians were comfortable using a single platform and for limited, often self-promotional, purposes only. Consistent with many political actors globally, Greek politicians are reluctant to be interactive not even aspiring to the 'controlled interactivity' model (Stromer-Galley, 2019) and trying to direct the behavior of their social media followers. Most participants described a largely centralized, hierarchical campaign with the politicians engaging in top-down communication. There was no discussion of building bottom-up, supportive communities, despite consultants hinting at the value of the Facebook platform for such purposes and therefore little evidence Greek politicians seek to benefit from the affordances of managed citizenship (Baldwin-Phillippi, 2015). Rather they just want to broadcast to a passive audience.

This over-arching finding confirms what content analysis studies have already established (e.g., Parisopoulos et. al., 2012; Poulakidakos and Veneti, 2016), but the dynamics of politician-consultant relationship offer important additional understanding of this phenomenon. According to consultants, they are the main drivers of innovation in social media usage in political campaigns, but their clients are not always receptive. One might argue this argument portrays politicians as the props and consultants as puppet masters in this relationship, but it is not as straightforward as that. It would seem that politicians determine strategy and act as a brake on innovation if they choose. An example of this is the fact that many politicians' profile pages are used just during election campaigns, then become dormant. Despite the fact that in a highly politicised media system, like the one in Greece, social media can be used as an opportunity for more politicians to be heard, to reach a wider population, and even to leverage media coverage platform use remains quite limited; this is due to the dominant position of traditional media as a source of political information and gaining visibility in Greece. Thus, Greek politicians are portrayed as being cautious, seeking only to broadcast, and placing greater value on visibility within traditional media to engage with more interactive communicational practices. Using social media platforms intermittently for broadcasting purposes break the conventions of social media usage for professionals as well as average users. Consultants know this but cannot exert full control; either they are only brought in for the election period, or they are restrained because of resistance from their client. Controlling what is posted in their name, and what feedback is made public, places the politician firmly in command of their profiles and it is this dynamic that continues to impede further innovation in social media use. While these are the perceptions of consultants, who research shows often overplay the value of their innovative approaches to social media usage (Baldwin Philippi, 2019), we suggest a tension exists at the heart of the development of political communication strategies is between consultants seeking quick wins which bolster their careers and politicians who are cautious of the personal and political value of engaging with innovative or radical communication strategies.

The conceptual framework of Kreiss et al. (2018) offers a very useful starting point for analyzing how campaign communications might differ across various social media platforms. However, when focusing on the under-explored but more globally comparable Greek context, we find areas where the framework would benefit from adjustment and development. The interviewees agree

that the candidate is the central figure but the promotion of their public persona and expertise involves a fairly uniform approach. It is not simply the candidates' levels of comfort with different platforms that govern their communication strategy as Kreiss et al propose, but the candidates' skill levels and their willingness to engage on social media which are governed by a range of wider factors including their nervousness about opening themselves up to their audiences. Similarly, while US candidates are able to develop a communication strategy drawing on behavioral trace data left by social media audiences the availability of such data relies heavily on the resources available. Greek politicians lack the resources, as well as in some cases the will, to be able to invest in targeting audiences and tailoring their messages. Hence, while applicable to a US context, elsewhere audience data is less likely to inform strategies. Baldwin Philippi (2015; 2019) points out, despite media hype and increased investment, there is a lack of empirical evidence of the effectiveness of data-driven campaigning, further research may use Greece as a comparator to test this hypothesis. Greek politicians do attempt to exploit the platform affordances that aid them to promote themselves, seeing Facebook as of particular value for increasing their visibility. Similarly, Greek consultants recognise the importance of communicating appropriately according to the platform genres, although often adhering to platform norms in simplistic ways. However, they are often concerned about the communication environment, for example viewing Twitter as a hostile environment. Hence genre is not simply a factor of the affordances but also relates to the norms of usage for political discourse within a nation. In terms of timing, Kreiss et al. limit focus to posting appropriately according to the electoral cycle and to coincide with major media events. Greek consultants argue that consistency and constancy are more important, having a consistent message across a career and ensuring the message is salient for the political context. These nuanced developments aid making Kreiss et al.'s framework appropriate for analyzing communication strategies in a wider range of contexts where the approach to social media enjoys lower resources and where politicians show greater timidity in engaging with a wide range of platforms and their users. While using laudatory language about the potential of digital tools, our interviewees were constrained in developing a maximum-adoption approach to digital for most clients due to the politician's profile, voter-base and campaign resources. We suggest this may well be the case in many nations.

Many studies of social media use from the USA find it to be a highly professional and sophisticated environment (Karpf, 2014; Kreiss, 2016; Kreiss et al., 2018). This was not how we would describe Greece, but then it is worth considering which of these is the outlier. With a two-party system, liberal campaign finance laws, widespread public adoption of social media and a presidential race where campaigns have hundreds of millions of dollars to spend, no other country can match the campaigning environment in the U.S. Within a multiparty system where campaign donations are spread amongst more parties, a media environment where analogue platforms still prevail with large parts of the electorate, with strict(er) campaign finance laws and campaign budgets that are far from the American ones (especially for the smaller parties), Greece arguably constitutes a campaign environment more typically found around the world. Little surprise, then, that we see parallels with social media use in other Southern, Eastern or Central European countries (Seizov, 2017; Macková et al., 2017; Mascheroni & Mattoni, 2013). Studies have found that even in the UK, often seen as a more professionalized campaign environment, ebbs and flows of social media embeddedness have been found (Lilleker & Jackson, 2010). Future research might therefore further explore some of the *systematic* drivers and impediments to social media embeddedness in various campaign contexts, as a way to advance the large amount of content analysis data that has now been collected across the world.

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