

Political Communication through the Prism of Social Media: How are Lebanese Political Parties Using Facebook in Electoral Campaigns?

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ABSTRACT

The integration of social media in political communication has expanded significantly over recent years. This article focuses on how politicians are using Facebook in electoral campaigns. The main objective is to analyse the different functions ascribed to this digital platform in electoral communication. The present research studies the usage of Facebook by political parties in Lebanon during the parliamentary election of 2018 based on quantitative content analysis. All Facebook posts of three major political parties published during the electoral campaign were collected and examined. The results of the study reveal first that most parties were using Facebook in a unidirectional way; that is, only to disseminate information without giving any real value to users' feedback. A prime example of this was how the Future Movement, a popular political party, made significant use of external links, and effective forms of controlled Facebook tools. This demonstrated how politicians aimed to contain and direct users to their preferred information flow. Second, emerging parties from the opposition tended to publish more negative and attack posts than incumbents. Third, the interactive tools of Facebook were used poorly. Fourth, there was, however, a relative difference with regards to political groups outside the formal institution of power, such as the Political Alliance "Kollouna Watani" who made better use of the interactive function. The main factors that could explain the findings are the historical background and path of the political parties as well as their position in or outside the government, the partisan and costly coverage of traditional media outlets, and the hybridisation of political communication.

Keywords: *Facebook, political communication, Hybrid media system, electoral campaign, Lebanese media.*

INTRODUCTION

Online social platforms have accelerated in popularity. Facebook is the largest social portal with 2.8 billion users (Pew Research Center, 2021) and produces four petabytes of content each day (Howard, 2020). The impressive amount of information generated and distributed within and across the different social networks is not without impact on how users consume political news. As a result, the production and distribution of information are no longer controlled by journalists from mainstream media and consumers can select their networks of communication to get political news (Gainous & Wagner, 2014). The alteration of these two essential elements of the political learning process by social media (Ibid., 2014) explains the intensifying usage of social networking platforms by politicians. According to a study carried out by Burson Cohn & Wolfe (2019), governments and leaders of 184 countries had a digital presence on the platform, equating to 95% of the 193 member states of the United Nations.

The integration of online communication strategies into electoral communication started in the United States in 2004 during primary elections. The former Democratic candidate, Howard Dean, was the first to make extensive use of digital techniques with the creation of a personalised

blog that helped him raise significant funding for his campaign (Stromer-Galley, 2019). However, this unconventional way of campaigning only reached its climax with Obama's campaigns in 2008 and 2012 (Gerstlé & Piar, 2020). The two campaigns are considered today as prototypes: "by the idea of prototypes I mean an entire cluster of innovations on the order of Dean's organisational, cultural, and technological uptake of the internet in 2004 and Obama's melding of digital, data, analytics, and technology in 2012" (Kreiss, 2016, p. 17-18). This new archetype of electoral communication inspired many countries, politicians and political parties in Europe, Latin America and other parts of the world who have already followed in the footsteps of their American counterparts. The ability of politicians to produce and shape content online renders social media a new tool in the hands of traditional interests:

Without expending high media costs, those in power or seeking power can use these new communication platforms to circumvent traditional media. This provides political actors with more control over their message, and as a result, an ability to shape the information that consumers have cognitively accessible and the attitudes and understanding that result (Gainous & Wagner, 2014, p. 15).

This study aims to explore how politicians use this new communication tool during election campaigns. The main question is whether political candidates might use Facebook only to disseminate, control and direct political information within the network, thus reinforcing an instrumental conception of political communication or, on the contrary, promoting a deliberate dimension of political communication by endorsing interactive forms of communication. Functions attributed to Facebook by politicians and the main platform features used by them are important variables to fully comprehend and answer the research question. The study will focus on the usage of Facebook by Lebanese political parties in the parliamentary election campaign of 2018.

Social media in Lebanon has a high and growing penetration rate, attracting the political class to heavily invest in these communication spaces. Their incorporation in political communication started as early as 2009 but took flight in the 2018 campaign for legislative elections. In 2017, one year before the parliamentary elections, 72% of the adult population was using social media and 52% of them were consuming news from social networking platforms (Pew Research Center, 2018). In 2018, with 68% of Lebanese users being adults, Facebook became the second most used platform after WhatsApp (Pew Research Center, 2019). These numbers pressed politicians to integrate new strategies to communicate with citizens online. Just about every Lebanese party or politician joined Facebook and Twitter between 2009-2011. Former Prime Minister, Saad Hariri, was one of the first Lebanese politicians to integrate Twitter in October 2009 as a strategy in his political communication. The tweets of Lebanese politicians gradually replaced press releases and were then relayed by traditional media, notably television. In 2016, socio-digital networks were integrated by several candidates into their campaign strategies for municipal elections. This was the case of the coalition "Beirut Madinati" who were one the first to lead their campaign activity through their Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/BeirutMadinati>), although today, socio-digital networks are trailing Lebanese television, which is still the highest reference in political communication (Gerstlé,

2015). On October 17, 2019, the great wave of popular protests that began in downtown Beirut quickly spread to the web where politicians and citizens alike were actively informing, communicating, and mobilising through the multiple tools of Facebook and Twitter.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Political communication is described as the use of multiple communication techniques by different actors (politicians, media, and citizens) who try to influence others either through instrumentalisation or through dialogue. It includes the production, distribution and reception of messages that could have a direct or indirect influence on politics (Graber & Smith, 2005). "The key element is that the message has a significant political effect on the thinking, beliefs, and behaviours of individuals, groups, institutions, and whole societies and the environments in which they exist" (Graber, 1993, p. 305). Political communication is constantly in an evolving state, one of the factors explaining its alteration is technological innovations. The diffusion of new communication technologies and their impact on politics have been considered and studied by many scholars, adopting rather an instrumental or a dialogical approach (Gainous, Segal & Wagner, 2018). Some have considered digital communication in politics as a means of democratising information, creating civil deliberation, and mobilising citizens (Spierings et al., 2018; Barber, 2003). The view, better known as the equalisation theory, sees the Internet as "a positive democratising entity that helps remove the barriers that favour some groups and individuals in the electorate" (Gainous & Wagner, 2014, p. 7). On the other hand, the instrumental approach, which is known as the normalisation theory, is adopted by scholars that see a minimalist impact of new technology on the traditional structure and power of the political systems (Bimber & Davis, 2003; Margolis & Resnick, 2000). Rather, this model argues that new communication technologies have given more power to political actors. For instance, social media in electoral campaigning is regarded simply as the newest tool in the hands of political candidates (Jungherr, 2016). Politicians see great potential in social networks in terms of controlling and directing the flow of information online received by citizens, and consequently, influencing political attitudes to create more polarised positions (Gainous & Wagner, 2014).

The evolution of political communication is noticeable in electoral campaigns, where Norris (2003) differentiates three types. First, pre-modern campaigning began in the mid-nineteenth century through 1950 and is based on direct communication and mutual relationships between political parties and voters. The latter is directly informed by party members and volunteers who ensure a mediation function between candidates and electorates through public meetings, door-to-door meetings, and many other electoral practices. Media are politically affiliated, promoting their candidates and their political agendas. A second "modern" phase then emerges in the early 1960s through the late 1980s, characterised by longer, centralised, and more expensive campaigns. The use of professional communicators, polls, voter segmentation and targeting through e-mail and telephone messages are all characteristics of this period (Paget, 2019). Direct communication between candidates and the electorate is rapidly being replaced by mediated communication, particularly with television and the growing rise of televised information. Finally, the post-modern period takes shape in the 1990s, where enhanced technology accelerates the need to professionalise political communication and adapt to new media. Moreover, television has become a multi-channel platform and remains the dominant

medium (Blumler, 2016). At the same time, the Internet is emerging, although it is not yet fully exploited by political parties or by the public. Its expansion to all institutions, especially political ones, and to many citizens, marks the beginning of the fourth and latest age of political communication. The use of social media in election campaigns is part of this fourth age as proposed by Blumler (2016) and later elaborated further by other authors (Bennet & Pfetsch, 2018). Web 2.0 and the innovations that come with it have become a new tool for electoral communication with new media channels such as social networks, microblogs, and video platforms. The integration of social media in campaigns is an opportunity for candidates to control and distribute their messages by bypassing gatekeepers of traditional media such as television or newspaper. Social media has been regarded as a new campaign tactic for running parties or candidates to avoid the filtering and interpretation of campaign messages by media outlets (Granberg-Rademacker & Parsneau, 2021).

However, social media networks and other new technologies applied in political campaigns are not a substitute for older forms of communication. On the contrary, traditional means and techniques used in lobbying were revived and adapted to recent campaigns (Stromer-Galley, 2019). Chadwick (2017) calls it the hybridisation of political communication, where digital media is combined with the logic of mainstream media. "Actors create, tap, or steer information flows in ways that suit their goals and in ways that modify, enable, or disable the agency of others, across and between a range of older and newer media settings" (Chadwick, 2017, p. xi). In Obama's 2008 electoral campaign, for instance, the platform *mybarackobama.com* facilitated and improved canvassing by equipping registered volunteers with online maps of target districts to be visited and with different arguments to be used depending on resident profiles (Chadwick, 2017). These hybrid practices however, poorly used the interactive potential of digital media. The interaction with users is limited and controlled (Stromer-Galley, 2019) as citizens are considered more as media agents (Nielsen, 2012) than actors of deliberation.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

The methodology is based on a quantitative approach through the content analysis of the totality of posts (612) published by three political parties during the election campaigns. Content analysis is a "research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication (Berelson, 1952, p. 18). The method aims at quantifying content into predetermined categories such as subjects or themes (Bryman et al., 2021). We have adopted an analysis grid with pre-constructed categories. This choice is based on several studies done to analyse social media publications of politicians or political parties (Boulianne & Larsson, 2021; Small, 2018; Hemsley et al., 2018; Lopez-meri et al., 2017; Gainous & Wagner, 2014). The unit of analysis is each Facebook post of the Future Movement (FM), the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) and Kollouna Watani (we are the nation) during the election campaign from February 5 through May 5, 2018. The selection of these specific parties was since two of them, the Future Movement and the Free Patriotic Movement, were already in the parliament and are strongly part of the current political system, while the other political parties that formed the coalition, Kollouna Watani, were in the opposition line and did not hold any seat in the parliament before the 2018 elections.

Facebook, like all social media, can produce and save digital traces of every user who has ever posted, shared, commented, or "liked" a post (Howard, 2020). Thus, all information exchanged, and relationships established are transformed into data which is then automatically analysed for various purposes (political, commercial, scientific, and academic). All data were collected by using the free Facepager software by entering the Facebook page Id of the three political parties. This first data gathering allowed access to all the posts, reactions, and comments during the period of the election campaign. There was no need to go into the field or conduct real-time observations. We have "liked" the Facebook pages in question with our profile without intervening or contacting either users or page administrators throughout the study period, positioning ourselves as a participating observer. Data gathering took place following the election. The data collected through the tool mentioned above were grouped into Excel and CSV files. This asynchronous method has one drawback, however, which is the probability of losing certain messages.

The variables coded were the functions attributed to Facebook posts and included six mutually exclusive categories: information, mobilisation, interaction, attack, personalisation, and courtesy. Information includes all transmission of top-down information from the political party such as article/press video publications, press releases, party videos, election program broadcasts and election posters. Mobilisation comprises any practice that invites users to act, such as invitations to events, incentives to vote, fundraising, calling users to change their profile picture or cover photo, inviting voters to events or voting via videos. Interactions are mostly questions raised by the party in question to encourage dialogue and to respond to comments from users; this is also an opportunity for users to get answers to questions they may have, as well as to discuss and exchange ideas. The attack is negative criticism towards political adversaries on their actions or ideology. Personalisation is all posts that include personal characteristics of a politician or aspects of their private lives to attract the sympathy of users. Finally, courtesy consists of posts to express wishes or condolences. Table 1 shows the analysis scheme used in this research for the content of posts. It includes the categories and characteristics that guide the classification of content posts.

Table 1: Analysis scheme for the content of posts

| Category | Characteristics |
|-----------------|--|
| Information | Campaign information and announcements, electoral program and political accomplishments, external news links about the election, press releases, and infographics. |
| Mobilisation | Invitation to events, call to vote, fundraising, an invitation to a gathering, call to change profile picture at party request, call to volunteers. |
| Interaction | Open questions by politicians to users, answering questions from users, live video by politicians. |
| Attack | Negative critics against opponents via written or audiovisual means. |
| Personalisation | Posts about personal life and traits of politicians, posts about campaigns backstage (meetings or gatherings, selfies etc.). |
| Courtesy | Posts about greetings or condolences. |

Before conducting the content analysis, descriptive analytics of each page were compared and analysed to distinguish the activity of political parties on Facebook in terms of performance, commitment, and degree of interactivity. These quantitative data were extracted through the software Facepager and consist of the number of posts per day, the number of reactions (likes, shares, responses) and the types of publications (photos, videos, links, statuses, and events). These statistical data are prima facie indicators of how political parties have used Facebook during campaigns. Facebook features such as replies, live streams, videos, photos, events, and links, are supportive elements of the functions used by political parties. The usage of external links is for instance backing up the information function attributed to Facebook by politicians. This feature allows political actors to not only disseminate information, but to direct its flow as well through specific links. Furthermore, photos and videos, including live streaming, are the most effective and widely used Facebook tools by world leaders (Burson Cohn & Wolfe, 2018). An image published by politicians generates an average of 1,750 interactions. In addition, video usage by world politicians produces an average of 2,615 interactions, while native videos engender an average of 4,489 (Ibid, 2018). In addition, politicians can resort to the interactive function of the reply Facebook tool which consists of answering back to comments of users. Finally, the event set-up tool can be used by political parties to help mobilise volunteers and other users to attend meetings, rallies, fundraisings, or concerts. Table 2 summarises the main Facebook tools mentioned above and the principal functions assigned to each one.

Table 2: Facebook features and functions

| The tool used by political parties | Functions |
|--|--------------------------------|
| Replies: responses to comments from users. | Interaction |
| Photos, videos and live videos: sharing visual and audio, public or private content and can directly and instantly ask and answer questions to users in case of live videos. | Interaction personalisation |
| Links: political parties share external links consisting of news, information, articles, television debate or interview. Help in controlling or directing the information seen by users. | information |
| Events: political parties share organised political events to inform and mobilise users. | Information mobilisation |

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Table 3 shows a larger number of posts published by the Future Movement during the election period, averaging 2 to 3 posts per day. They are followed by Kollouna Watani (2 posts per day on average) and lastly by the Free Patriotic Movement (1 to 2 posts per day). The Future Movement also gained more reactions from users (like button and its emotions) to its publications. The Like button allows users to interact with a message in different ways and virtually express their feelings towards a post without written communication (or actual comments). Reactions may also indicate greater interest from subscribers in content published by political parties. However,

comments are more important indicators of interaction since they offer users the opportunity to express themselves through written communication and exchange opinions in a digital space. The Kollouna Watani page has the highest number of comments posted by subscribers in comparison to the other two pages, almost double the amount. This number demonstrates a greater commitment to discussion and interaction. Political party responses to user feedback reinforce these interactions and encourage users to debate further. Kollouna Watani was the only one to use the reply feature by responding 46 times to subscriber comments. Unlike the Future Movement and Free Patriotic Movement pages, the political alliance even allowed its subscribers to post onto its page directly (108 publications).

Table 3: Key data from Kollouna Watani Alliance, Future Movement, and Free Patriotic Movement Facebook pages The period from Feb 5 till May 5

| Facebook official page | Kollouna Watani | Future Movement | Free Patriotic Movement |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-------------------------|
| Date of creation | 22-Dec-2017 | 15-Aug-09 | 21-Apr-11 |
| Number of fans in 2018 | 35,404 | 63 520 | 49 693 |
| Number of fans in 2021 | 55 471 | 64 993 | 54 316 |
| Number of posts analysed | 205 | 249 | 158 |
| Reactions to page post | 82 386 | 87838 | 65 027 |
| Fan comment on page post | 7 749 | 3870 | 2 422 |
| Share of page posts | 21 360 | 2904 | 3562 |
| Posts published on the page by fans | 108 | 0 | 0 |
| Number of photos | 108 | 80 | 88 |
| Number of videos | 79 | 47 | 50 |
| Number of links | 7 | 122 | 16 |
| Number of events | 3 | 0 | 0 |



Figure 1: Example of replies from Kollouna Watani’s page to subscriber comments.



Figure 2: Example of posts posted by a subscriber on Kollouna Watani's Facebook page

The Kollouna Watani page was more effective in disseminating and expanding the flow of its information with an amount of 23,360 posts shared by subscribers. The sharing feature on Facebook is significant since it expands the diffusion of political and campaigning messages not only to users that liked the page but to their friends' networks. Future movement and Free Patriotic movement posts were shared poorly compared to the former page. The political messages of the coalition "We are the Nation" are the ones that echoed most in this digital network. Users were therefore more interested and attracted by the content of Kollouna Watani. Interests of users can be measured through the engagement rate. It represents users who liked, shared, and commented on posts divided by the total number of followers on the Facebook page. Again, the Kollouna Watani page had the highest engagement rate per post, at 1.5%, followed by the FM and FPM pages with 0.6% and 0.9% respectively. Photos and videos were highly employed first by the FPM and second by Kollouna Watani. These available features enable page owners to increase reactions and interaction with users. Both pages made use of photos and videos to inform but also to personalise the campaign through backstage campaign pictures of political candidates for instance. In addition, Kollouna Watani made greater use of live videos (ceremonies, meetings, Q&A sessions). Live videos highly increase the engagement and interaction between political candidates and users. On the other hand, photos represented only 32.1% of FM publications. Hence, the party did not make sufficient use of the photo tools during its digital Facebook campaign. Similarly, the usage of videos was very low, accounting for 18.9% of all publications on FM pages during the election campaign. The FM relied much more on the link tool (49% of its total publications). External links (links from online websites) can play a significant role in informing users about current events, the activities of candidates and their election programs. The high amount of external links usage is an indicator of how the political party aimed not only at a top-down transmission of information, but also their aspiration to orient and direct what users should read. Moreover, 107 out of the 122 external links published by the FM came from the political party's press outlet, the Al-Moustaqbal website.

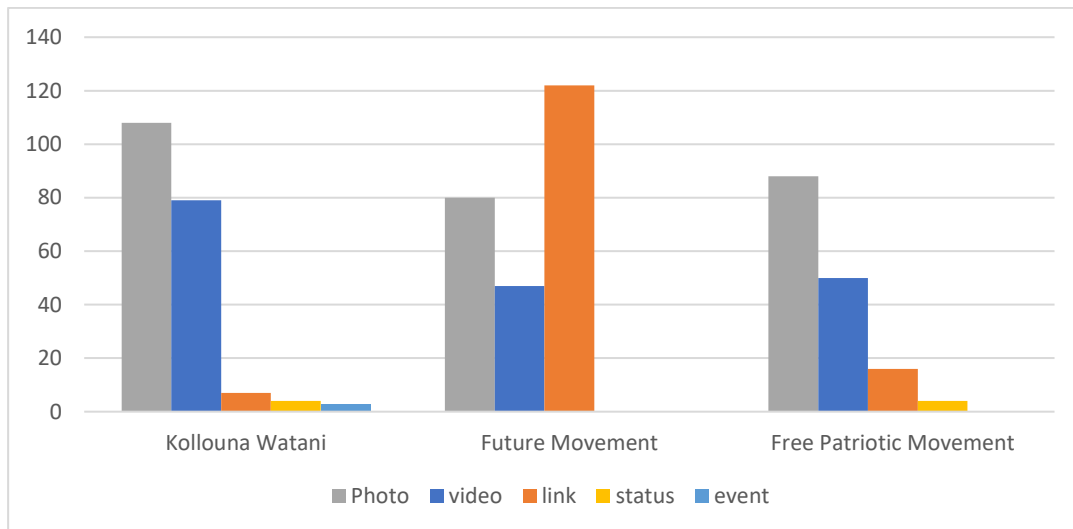


Figure 3: Types of publications



Figure 4: Example of subscriber photo shared by Kollouna Watani page during Lebanese ex-pats voting.

FPM and Kollouna Watani have been effective in using photo and video tools to increase user interaction and engagement with publications. Kollouna Watani interacted much more with subscribers by occasionally responding to their comments or initiating live video question-and-answer sessions. The FM page made much more use of the publication of external links. This method is often insufficient to achieve a high engagement rate. The user engagement was therefore stronger for the Kollouna Watani and FPM pages. The former is on the frontline with a strategy that authorised subscribers not only to comment on page posts, but also to produce publications as illustrated above. To gain more in-depth information and analysis, we carried out a categorical content analysis of the three Facebook pages. This method has been applied to determine the strategic objectives of Facebook usage by political parties. We recall that the content of publications has been categorised into the six categories mentioned earlier in the article.

Table 4: Number of publications of Kollouna Watani, Future Movement and Free Patriotic Movement by categories.

| Category | Kollouna Watani | % | Future Movement | % | Free Patriotic Movement | % |
|-----------------------|-----------------|------|-----------------|------|-------------------------|------|
| Information | 101 | 41 | 191 | 76.7 | 72 | 45.6 |
| Mobilisation | 42 | 17 | 37 | 14.9 | 32 | 20.2 |
| Interaction | 68 | 27.5 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 1.9 |
| Attack | 29 | 11.2 | 6 | 2.4 | 0 | 0 |
| Personalisation | 5 | 2 | 14 | 5.6 | 41 | 26 |
| Courtesy | 2 | 0.8 | 1 | 0.4 | 10 | 6.3 |
| Total number of posts | 247 | 100 | 249 | 100 | 158 | 100 |

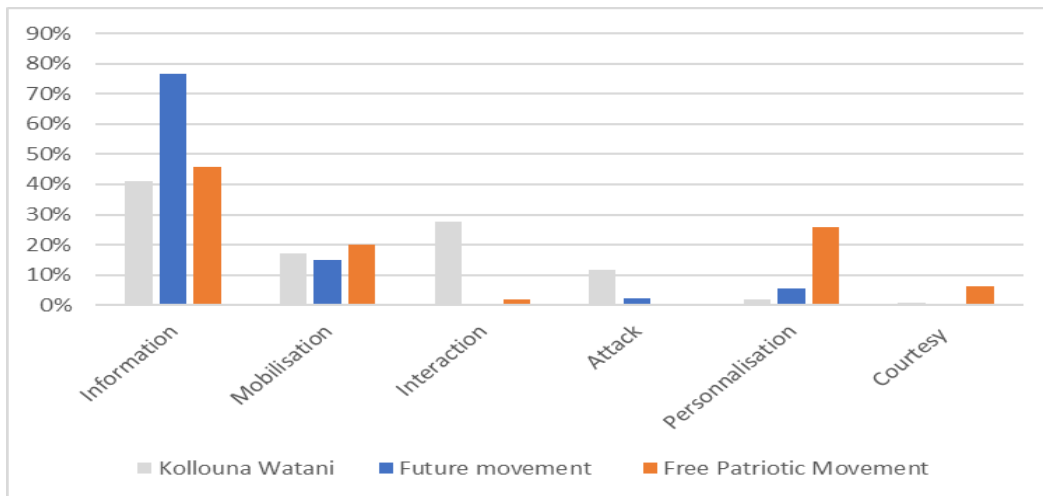


Figure 5: Percentage of the total number of publications by category for each political party.

The first significant finding is that all political parties analysed in this study used Facebook primarily to spread information about their political campaign and proposed policies, the main aim, therefore, being to maintain a unidirectional way of communication, like traditional media logic. This top-down communication approach is more obvious for the Future Movement (76.7%) by linking 122 of its posts to external information related to the party’s political activities and accomplishments, as well as that of its candidates. The strategy of providing users with information in favour of a political party is an effective way to use social media, controlling what information voters will have access to, to forge an opinion about candidates (Gainous & Wagner, 2014). In addition, the information function was used by the Free Patriotic Movement (45.6%) not only to expose news about the campaign and its program, but more specifically to diffuse information about the party’s accomplishments. 12.3% of the FPM’s posts were about the political achievements of the party during its time in government. Kollouna Watani used the information function (41%) to provide news about their political campaign, but mainly to orient and centre the information flow around the theme of corruption in the network. 25.1% of the alliance’s posts were dispersing information about corruption in the political system driven by

political parties in power in the form of videos, photos, and infographics. This strategy to direct the information flow towards the corruption theme was reinforced by the attack function used mainly by Kollouna Watani (11.2%) and used especially by the coalition opposing the political parties participating in the government (FM and FPM). The two political parties in power poorly resorted to attacks against their incumbents and favoured the dissemination of information to praise and highlight their achievements. On the contrary, Kollouna Watani used part of the information function and the entire attack function to criticise and discredit the government.

The mobilisation function was used partially to call on people to vote and to participate in campaign events. The Free Patriotic Movement (20.2%) and Kollouna Watani (17%) engaged the most in these functions. However, Kollouna Watani's usage was slightly different since the alliance also called on users to change their profile pictures and to collect funds for the campaign. The request to alter pictures and replace them with the campaign's logo or slogan is an online method aimed at mobilising voters, a tactic that was only applied by the emerging alliance Kollouna Watani. Established parties such as FM and FPM tried to mobilise supporters by asking page likers to attend campaign events and invite them to vote.

The interaction function is almost at a standstill for FPM (1.9%) and FM (0%), while it represents 30.4% of the publications of Kollouna Watani. The 46 replies to subscribers made by Kollouna Watani's page were added to the interaction category. The political alliance made larger use of Facebook interaction functions such as live videos, Q&A sessions, and responses to comments from subscribers. The political alliance partly applied a bidirectional way of communication by replying to people. The live videos with interactive questions were also applied by Kollouna Watani's candidates to create a close relationship with users and open the space for a direct dialogue between politicians and citizens. A closer, more personal relationship with users can also be built by politicians sharing their private lives and their feelings and emotions. The personalisation function is significant in the FPM (26%) while it is at a low degree for the FM (5.6%) and Kollouna Watani (2%). Most posts used as a mechanism for personalisation were backstage campaign pictures of candidates, especially Gebran Bassil, the president of the FPM. Some emotional and private posts of Bassil were shared as well on the FPM page.



Figure 6: Type of publication of the personalisation category on the FPM page



Figure 7: Example of the mobilisation category: fundraising event.

Several interesting and general findings can be summed up. First, the main function attributed to Facebook by all political parties examined is information. The objective is to distribute information and control and expand its flow within the network through different strategies and tools available on the platform. Second, political parties in the opposition and outside the formal institution of power tend to publish more negative and attack posts than incumbents. However, incumbents are more likely to publish about their political achievements. Third, the interaction function is used more by emerging political parties or alliances than the existing political parties in power. Political candidates outside the power are more willing to communicate and exchange ideas with voters and are therefore promoting a more dialogical model of communication in campaigns. Fourth and finally, the use of Facebook as a mechanism of personalisation was generally poor and limited to few emotional posts to attract and mobilise voters.

DISCUSSION

For an in-depth understanding of the results, the following factors are taken into consideration:

- Historical background, political path and position occupied by political parties
- Partisan media outlets
- High cost of broadcasting outlets
- Hybridity in the use of Facebook

First, contextualisation of the 2018 election campaign is essential for a better comprehension of the use of social media by political parties. The 2018 election ended a crisis that had persisted since 2009 when the last legislative election was held. Funded mostly by political parties and their leaders, the Lebanese media have also suffered from the political impasse. The absence of an election campaign for the past nine years and the economic slowdown of the country have led to a drop in financial allocations paid to television and radio stations by politicians and businessmen. According to the Lebanese Maharat Foundation (NGO campaigning on issues of freedom of opinion and expression), the 2018 election period was an incredible opportunity for the Lebanese media to bail out their coffers (El Hussein, 2018). Despite

a new electoral law that legally regulates the role and responsibilities of media during the election campaign period, the price of appearances on the audiovisual media quickly reached huge sums.

Two of the political parties selected for this study, the Future Movement, and the Free Patriotic Movement, officially claim themselves as liberal and secular parties. Nevertheless, the FPM and the FM are supported respectively by popular bases of Christian Sunni majorities (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2018). The Lebanese political system is based on the principle of consensual democracy, a system of the agreement for the proportional sharing of power among the elites of every denominational community in the country. The FPM and the FM were political parties already in power with broad parliamentary and ministerial representation long before the 2018 elections. The President of the Lebanese Republic, Michel Aoun, is himself the founder of the FPM formed in 1994 and officially recognised in 2005 after Aoun's return from political exile in France, and further solidified in the legislative elections that same year. In 2006, the FPM signed a memorandum of understanding with the Shi'ite party, Hezbollah, which became its main political ally. The Future Movement was founded in 1994 by former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, who was assassinated in 2005. The party is now led by his son and former Prime Minister, Saad Hariri.

As observed earlier, political parties already in the government resorted to more traditional usage of Facebook such as circulating information about the campaign, electoral program, and their achievements. They have replicated their one-way communication approach to new digital platforms, their main objectives being primarily to expand and control the information flow as they do with traditional broadcast outlets owned by them. Traditional political parties in Lebanon only partially face the control of traditional media gatekeepers, since most important media outlets are owned by them or politically affiliated with them (Samir Kassir Foundation (Reporters Without Borders), 2018). Lebanese media news and coverage are partisans since political parallelism is a distinct characteristic of the Lebanese media system (El-Richani, 2016). Hence, the Lebanese media landscape is portrayed as "polarised and its dominant feature is the interwoven relationship between media and the politicians in Lebanon" (Harb, 2013, p.41). The FM and the FPM are both owners of media organisations and thus part of the instrumental and polarised media system. The Communist Party controls several media outlets, mainly the OTV television channel and the radio station, Sawt al-Mada. As for the Future movement campaign, the party owns two traditional media outlets, the television channel Future TV and the newspaper Al-Moustaqbal (all Future TV programs have been suspended since 2019 due to lack of financial resources, and Al-Moustaqbal newspaper only exists in digital form since that same year). The way Facebook is used by the two parties is in line with the traditional Lebanese media since the main goal is to distribute news and information in favour of the party to polarise and mobilise supporters without real interactions. The FPM and the FM, which respectively own the television channels OTV, and Future TV did not respect the legal framework imposed during the election period (Nader & Mikhael, 2018). The new electoral law stipulates the responsibility of audiovisual media to ensure balanced and impartial media coverage. These two media outlets have largely given greater visibility and media coverage to their political parties at the expense of other parties or political alliances.

According to a study carried out by Maharat Foundation, OTV devoted 52.92% of its media coverage to the FPM during the election campaign (Ibid, 2018). Future TV, meanwhile,

attributed 56.35% of its media coverage to the FM during the same election period. On the other side, Kollouna Watani, emerging in the 2018 elections as a political coalition and not a party, is composed of 66 candidates who are either independents or members of political groups/parties opposed to the system and the hegemony of traditional political parties. No candidate has previously held a parliamentary or governmental position except former minister Charbel Nahas, founder and president of the political party "Citizens in a State". The political alliance has no media outlet and has used alternative means of communication such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. The presence of the alliance in the opposition and outside the formal institution of power could explain the higher use of the attack function against incumbents. Second, the information function is important for Kollouna Watani to present and inform voters about its political program since it is poorly covered on national TV channels the likes of OTV and Future TV, which attributed very little media coverage to the Kollouna Watani alliance. Most of the electoral lists unveiled by Kollouna Watani were presented via Facebook Live due to the absence of any coverage by traditional media. Coverage for the alliance is almost unapparent on Future TV. This inequality of media visibility is not only limited to private companies but also the public channel Télé Liban (TL). Although TL had granted, as per law, free airtime to candidates, coverage of different parties was not equal. TL mainly covered the political activities of the President and members of the government (EU Election Observation Mission, 2018). Among the political parties, the FM received 8.13% of TL's total media coverage during the election campaign, whilst the FPM received 10.56%, and Kollouna Watani received slightly more at 11.73% (Nader & Mikhael, 2018). It is important to note that whilst coverage was not equal on TL, this public channel has a low audience which in turn is the reason for its low popularity amongst electoral candidates. The greater use of the interaction function made by Kollouna Watani can be explained as well by its political position. Being outside the government and aspiring to come into power makes it easier for politicians to open to supporters with greater transparency and fluidity in their discussions. At the same time, the lack of interaction of FM and FPM Facebook pages can be attributed to an apprehension of the political parties in power to fully open to online voters, especially on controversial political topics. This function makes them more exposed and vulnerable.

In addition, the high cost of airtime on the various private and partisan television channels played a determinant factor in shifting to online communication platforms. Numerous violations have been reported on the staggering cost of media access by candidates (EU Election Observation Mission, 2018). In addition, the sources of funding for candidates who have paid access to these channels are rarely disclosed (Ibid, 2018). The offers made by television stations reached 6000 dollars for a minute of airtime and \$240,000 for a televised debate (El Husseini, 2018). Unable to pay such large sums, Facebook was considered an alternative platform by smaller political parties and even larger ones. Kollouna Watani received only 5.89% of media coverage on private television channels, whilst Future TV and OTV received 22.20% and 21.02% respectively (Nader & Mikhael, 2018). Smaller parties or alliances used the information and interaction functions to compensate for their low media visibility and find innovative strategies to interact and reach new voters, in particular the younger generation. Larger parties in power have made massive use of the information function to reduce costs of media coverage and as a means to reach a wider audience by trying to dominate and control the information flow online.

Finally, the hybridisation of political communication contributes to the increasing usage of Facebook, which is resorting to the information function to establish links with the mainstream media. This strategy was mainly adopted by political parties already in the government to reinforce the news and information flow of their owned traditional media, especially TV stations. The Future movement linked its online traditional newspaper or its TV station to its Facebook page 122 times. The FM and the FPM re-broadcasted video content via Facebook about their election campaigns broadcasted first on their respective TV channels, Future TV and OTV (see figure 9). Part of the information posts on the FPM page consisted of announcing and reminding users about interviews or appearances of their candidates on television shows (see figure 8). This strategy consists of publicising candidates' participation in traditional media and of expanding their information to the digital platform. Furthermore, it leads to more engagement from dual-screened users since they watch candidates on televised programs and simultaneously react and produce real-time commentary about the program's content on Facebook. These hybrid communication approaches are aimed primarily at reinforcing the content of older media through newer media logic. On the contrary, with less frequent access to mainstream media, outsiders such as the coalition Kollouna Watani made hybrid usage of Facebook to create a large impact and increased coverage of rare television appearances of their candidates. The main goal was to strengthen their presence and expand their information on traditional media outlets. Kollouna Watani adopted new Facebook interactive strategies of communication such as Facebook live (41 times) broadcasting events, debates, and interviews that were not covered by mainstream media. This new media logic is a way to indirectly influence and attract traditional media such as TV and newspapers. Part of the content broadcasted on TV channels that covered the political coalition's campaign was originally generated and extracted from social media. We can conclude that both political parties in and outside the government made hybrid use of Facebook through informative and interactive functions. However, the aim of this usage goes in a reversed direction: the FM and FPM used their Facebook page and its different functions to reinforce and control information produced first on mainstream and partisan media. On the contrary, Kollouna Watani generated information and interaction on its Facebook page first to indirectly influence and penetrate the traditional media landscape.



Figure 8: Example of hybrid usage of Facebook from the FPM



Figure 9: Example of hybrid usage of Facebook from the Future Movement

CONCLUSION

This study emphasised the different functions attributed to Facebook by Lebanese political parties during the 2018 parliamentary election campaign. The categorical analysis of Facebook posts was crucial in determining the different usages of social media in political communication. In addition, the different tools offered by the social portal such as sharing external links, posting videos and photos, and launching live videos were also analysed as indicators to understand how political parties made use of Facebook. The results of the research showed that the interactive features of Facebook have not been used sufficiently by the political parties examined in this study. The political coalition, Kollouna Watani, slightly distinguished itself from other parties. The alliance moved towards more dialogical forms of communication by engaging much more with citizens and providing them with greater space for expression. However, the highest function applied by all political parties is information, which implies adopting a traditional top-down approach to their Facebook usage. Political candidates resorted to the digital platform mainly to disseminate, control and direct political information within the network, thus reinforcing an instrumental conception of political communication. An approach leading to more traditional use of Facebook: limited interactivity with users and low consideration of message feedback. The findings demonstrated as well how Kollouna Watani made more use of the attack function than the two other political parties. The latter resorted more to the information function to publish about their political achievements. The historical backgrounds of the political parties and their position in or outside the government, the partisan and costly coverage of traditional media outlets, and the hybridisation of political communication were the main reasons discussed to explain the findings. Political communication in Lebanon is in an atypical state, representing a combination between the pre-modern phase of political communication, explained above, and the fourth phase of political communication proposed by Blumler (2016). In other words, it could be described as the intermeshing of existing partisan media with new technological communication strategies and practices such as social media platforms.

In the run-up to new parliamentary elections in 2022, the deliberate uses of Facebook and other social networks could be better employed. Facebook, Twitter and recently Clubhouse have now become platforms widely used by young people in Lebanon to discuss the political and economic impasse that the country is going through. In 2018, 90% of young Lebanese adults (18-36 years) were already using social networking sites (Pew Research Center, 2018). With an increasing unemployment rate and the growing immigration of Lebanese youth, the dialogue between citizens and politicians has stalled. In the next elections, political parties outside power stand to gain from strengthening a dialogical use of social media. These innovative communication strategies and their content might influence directly or indirectly the Lebanese mainstream media in terms of media exposure and coverage. As for traditional political formations, it is essential to substitute the instrumental logic of social networks for a much more interactive logic with users. The first step is to be able to expose oneself more to the questions and criticisms of citizens. Ultimately, new digital communication strategies will have to be reconsidered if political parties want to reach a younger electorate and re-engage with them. Second, to think of social media platforms not only as channels of information diffusion but as a space of interaction as well. However, a question remains as to how many tools and algorithms of social networks are enabling political parties to contain information flow and contribute to more polarisation.

BIODATA

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