

LIVING IN THE DIGITAL AGE

SELF-PRESENTATION, NETWORKING, PLAYING, AND PARTICIPATING IN POLITICS

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Czech Politicians Go Online: Is this e-Democracy or Just a Campaign Move?

Alena Macková

ABSTRACT

The last few years have witnessed an intensified academic debate on the potential of new media in politics in the Czech Republic. However, discussions on new media's impact – democratic potential, mobilization of the electorate, dialogue between citizens and politicians, etc. – tend to involve political parties rather than politicians as individual users. This chapter is mostly based on data analyzing the individual use of new media (and, specifically, social networking sites) by politicians. The aim of the chapter is to provide an insight into research that we conducted in 2012–14 on how Czech political actors used new media in four different elections. We believe that it is crucial to ask not only whether politicians have already taken up new media, but also how they use it. We need to ask whether political communication changes substantially as a consequence of the adoption of new media. Our data suggest that regular online politician-citizen dialogue is marginal. It appears as though contemporary politicians perceive new media merely as a useful tool for campaigning rather than effective communication with citizens.

Keywords

new media, politicians, campaign, democracy, election, social network sites

INTRODUCTION

The 2013 Czech presidential election – the first ever direct election for this position – sparked interest in the democratic potential of new media among the general public as well as scholars. However, the ensuing discussions focused mostly on mainstream political party websites and profiles on Social Network Sites (SNS) rather than on political actors as individual users. Politicians in particular have recently become the focus of attention in the shift towards exploration of the use of SNS (Herrnson, Stokes-Brown, & Hindman, 2007; Strandberg, 2013). The focus on politicians as new technology users is

both interesting and important, especially since new technologies offer new opportunities in communication between citizens and politicians as both types of actors can bypass gatekeepers in mass media and communicate directly.

This chapter explores the current trends in Czech political communication as well as political actors' perception of new technologies. Although the debate on new media and politics refers mostly to the potential of "e-democracy" in terms of greater opportunities for political action for citizens and political actors, more recent research conveys less optimism in this respect (Graham, Broersma, & Hazelhoff, 2013). In the three years of our research we gradually mapped the usage of new media by Czech politicians. However, we argue that it is crucial not only to map whether and how professional politicians use new media but, crucially, whether such use merely copies the use of "old" media and, most importantly, whether the practice enhances democracy or establishes another way of soliciting votes.

Even though some politicians declare the importance of new media adoption, our data indicate politicians' distrust of and inability to use new media efficiently in their interactions with citizens. We argue that the model of computer-mediated, routine, politician-citizen dialogue is not widespread; on the contrary, new media are mostly perceived only as campaign tools.

In our research (based mostly on content analysis and interviews) we explored different elections from 2012–14 (Regional Council, Senate, Chamber of Deputies, President).

POLITICIANS IN A NEW ERA OF COMMUNICATION

New media has been on the radar of political communication scholars for more than two decades and countless research has been conducted since the attempt to map the transformation of political communication in "the third age of political communication" (Blumler & Kavanagh, 2009), in "the fifth information age" (Bimber, 2003; Smith, 2010), or in "the digital age" (Farell, Kolodny, & Medvic, 2001). New media is often seen as a solution to problems in democratic societies where citizens are becoming increasingly disinterested in traditional political institutions and their participation in elections is decreasing. Although the Czech Republic is quite a young democratic state that embarked on the transition from a communist to a democratic political regime 25 years ago, it – similar to many other democratic countries – faces a decline in electoral participation (Linek, 2013) and a growing alienation from

both political institutions and politicians.¹⁴ Crucial factors contributing to this disillusionment during the period of democratic and economic transformation included an economic slowdown and the first political crises and corruption affairs of the main political parties in the second half of the 1990s that resulted in growing discontent with political elites and distrust in the responsiveness of the system. According to Coleman (2005), citizens have become more cynical and reserved and less willing to trust political elites that are perceived as distant, arrogant, and not worthy of trust. It is assumed that new media cannot only become an important source of information when traditional sources of information are abandoned but that it can also help bridge the growing communication gap between political elites and citizens (Coleman & Moss, 2008; Graham, Broersma, & Hazelhoff, 2013). According to Coleman (2005), politicians' online activities represent a response to the deepening gap between citizens and politicians, with politicians attempting to gain new, direct, and straightforward access to voters (Coleman & Moss, 2008; Coleman & Blumler, 2009).

The research on politicians and new media is dominated by a focus on the adoption of new media, especially as tools for electoral communication (Herrnson, Stokes-Brown, & Hindman, 2007; Howard, 2006; Williams & Gulati, 2012; Larrson & Kalsnes, 2014), following Barack Obama's success in the U.S. presidential election in 2008 (Cogburn & Espinoza-Vasquez, 2011). However, several recent studies have extended the scope to a more detailed analysis of communication and new media content produced by politicians (Graham, Broersma, & Hazelhoff, 2013; Vergeer & Hermans, 2011; Grant, Moon, & Grant, 2010) or have – in addition to politicians – included citizens in order to map the influence of new media on voting behavior (Strandberg, 2013).

However, research that would sum up the findings thus far and outline clear general trends in how political elites use new media has been missing. While studies characterize the transformation of communication between politicians and citizens as moderate, their findings are often contradictory. This is probably because they explore limited phenomena (they typically focus on a short period of time, one medium, one campaign, etc.), which makes it complicated to understand the broader context or identify more general trends (Wright, 2012; Dahlgren, 2013). Hence, in this chapter I attempt to connect the findings

14 Voter turnout in the first parliamentary election (Chamber of Deputies) in 1996 was 76.4% compared to 59.5% in the 2013 parliamentary election.

of our studies and identify a more general model of political elites' new media communication.

RESEARCH AND METHODS

Before I delve into the findings of our research, some disclaimers are necessary. This chapter does not aim to provide the findings of a single study; rather, it attempts to summarize findings of research on Czech politicians' new media use conducted by myself or in conjunction with other Czech scholars over almost three years, from April 2012 to October 2014. Some of the research that I refer to here is ongoing and, overall, it tends to focus on Facebook, the most commonly used SNS among Czech citizens and politicians. According to the most recent findings (Macek et al., 2015; Macková & Macek, 2015) 38% of Czech citizens (47% of internet users) used Facebook actively in 2014 compared to 3% active Twitter users. Facebook adoption, as well as other types of activities on SNSs, significantly differ in age groups (Figure 1). For example, only 6% of respondents declared SNS as their source of news, but these were

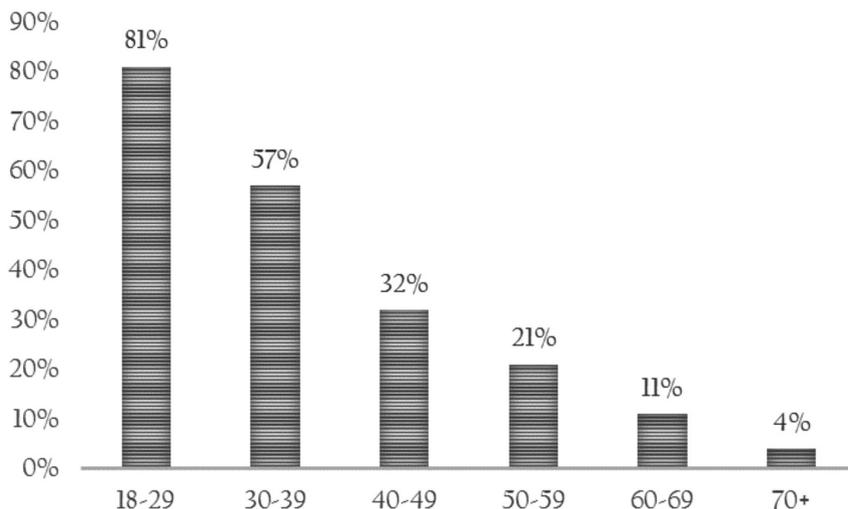


Figure 1: Usage of Facebook by age groups.

Source: Macek et al., 2015; Macková & Macek, 2015.

important sources for the youngest (ages 18–29) citizens (20%) who also use the internet (96%) and SNS (81%) more often than older citizens. Nevertheless, there is a rather limited tendency to discuss or deal with politics on SNS. Only

13% of SNS users (3% of all respondents) said they friended or followed a candidate or similar political figure.¹⁵

I refer to four studies in this chapter. The first took place in autumn 2012 during the Czech regional council¹⁶ and senate¹⁷ elections. It was the first comprehensive study on the adoption of new media by Czech politicians (see Macková, Fialová, & Štětka, 2013). Since not a single study dealt with the spread of new media among Czech political elites at the time, we focused only on some tools that were adopted by candidates before the 2012 regional and Senate elections (N=484).¹⁸

The second research took place during the presidential elections at the beginning of 2013. This time we focused on contents produced by all nine candidates (see also Štětka, Macková, & Fialová, 2014)¹⁹ before the elections, concentrating on SNS activities and the prevailing style of communication.

The third study was conducted under my supervision by MA student Kateřina Peroutková. In summer 2013, Peroutková conducted in-depth interviews with members of the Czech Parliament (from both chambers) (N=10) to explore their Facebook use and motivations as their new media use in a non-election period (Peroutková 2014).²⁰

And finally, the fourth research was a longitudinal study on both the activity (adoption and frequency of SNS use) and communication style (content strategy) adopted by members of the Lower House of the Czech Parliament. Data collection involved all deputies (N=200), i.e., gathering information about the adoption of new media and Facebook content themselves, in three monthlong waves:

15 According to Pew Internet Research (2013), 20% of American users in 2012 friended or followed candidates.

16 The Czech Republic is divided into 13 regions and the capital Prague. Regional assembly representatives (the number of seats depends on the population of the region) are elected every four years. The assemblies form regional councils that elect the presidents of the region (*hejtman* in Czech).

17 The Parliament of the Czech Republic consists of two chambers: the Lower House – the Chamber of Deputies (200 members) – and the Upper House – the Senate (81 members). Members of the Senate are elected for six-year terms. Elections take place every two years and one third are elected in one-seat constituencies.

18 We collected data on the use of several tools (personal websites, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and blogs) by all candidates in the senate election and by party leaders in regional elections.

19 The data from Facebook and Twitter cover two periods: 23 November 2012 to 12 January 2013 and 13 January 2013 to 26 January 2013.

20 The data was used with Peroutková's permission.

- (1) May 2013: non-election period;
 (2) September-October 2013: period before early parliamentary elections²¹;
 (3) May 2014: non-election period.

CZECH POLITICIANS ONLINE

There is no doubt that new media has gradually become a common tool for Czech politicians. In autumn 2012 almost a third of the candidates (26%) for regional president had their own website, as did twice as many candidates for Senate seats (60%). The most widespread SNS in the Czech Republic, Facebook, was used by more than half of the candidates in the two elections (55%). A similar picture emerged in the case of Czech deputies elected in 2010 (Figure 2). Actually, in May 2013 more than half had a (more or less active) website and a profile or a fan page on Facebook where they could publish/receive information and communicate with citizens. Twitter was used by only 6%, similar to the most popular video-sharing website, YouTube.

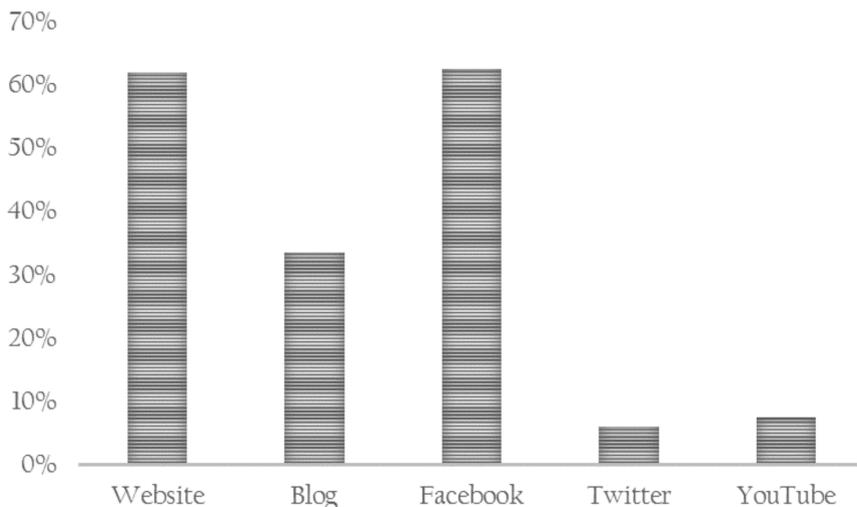


Figure 2: Adoption of new media by Czech deputies in May 2013 (non-election period; N=200).

Source: Author

21 Early elections were held on 25 and 26 October 2013.

A considerable share of politicians obviously use new technologies actively and many of them like using online SNS as part of their communication.

It is an amazing and very strong tool in political struggle, Facebook. You can systematically create a smear campaign that you could not have even imagined possible. You cannot set it up like that anywhere, in no print media, like on Facebook. (Senator, male)

Well, communication [on Facebook] is really fast, I really can't be happier with it. If we want to come to see each other, it gets arranged right away. We used to have to wait for a letter and then for a reply, then exchange numbers so that we could arrange an appointment... (Deputy, female)
(Respondents as cited in Peroutková, 2014)

Despite the relatively widespread adoption of new media and the enthusiasm of some politician-users, there are many who use new media in limited ways or not at all. Almost half of the monitored deputies' Facebook profiles and fan pages were, at least during data collection in May, without any posts or the posts were not entirely public.²² Quite a few politicians seem to be more sceptical and careful about using SNS for political purposes, which may relate to their personal or mediated negative experiences, or to the fact that SNS communication does not suit them – they do not internalize this style of communication (Peroutková, 2014).

After I gained initial experience two or three years ago I found [Facebook] such a waste of time... I don't doubt that many politicians see it differently... (Senator, male)

I don't like online chat and I don't like text messages. And I don't particularly like emails either. And that's all for the same reason, the fact that you need to simplify everything, and the risk of offending someone or explaining something inaccurately increases significantly. (Senator, male)
(Respondents as cited in Peroutková 2014)

The belief that politicians should use new media tends to be a strong motivation for setting up an account, a profile, and/or a fan page. However, this initial motivation tends to remain the key motivation. Using new media and presenting oneself in this way tends to be understood as an obligation – in sharp contrast with the enthusiastic adoption of new media mentioned above.

²² Only public contents were entered into the analysis.

When adopting new technologies, some politicians even knowingly present themselves as “progressive” and “modern” (Nilsson & Carlsson, 2013: 9), since new technologies are seen as a necessity for a modern politician.

And why am I on Facebook? Well, that is simply key to a modern politician's presentation... I would just feel deprived of a chance to present my opinions. (Deputy, male)

We were one of the first ones who started using [Facebook] in the campaign quite purposefully. We knew that it is a tool necessary for us in order to get across. (Deputy, male)
(Respondents as cited in Peroutková, 2014)

This sense of obligation/necessity to use new media stems from (perceived or actual): (1) public/social pressure in terms of a necessity to be available and reachable (online, up-to-date), presenting oneself as a modern politician (propagation, self-presentation), as transparent, or authentic; (2) pressure from political collaborators or opponents as explained by the so-called “me too effect” (Sudulich, Wall, Jansen, & Cunningham, 2010) in terms of an effort to “keep up” with colleagues; and (3) pressure from one’s own political party to use these communication channels for promotion, especially in the pre-election period, which can also speed up the adoption of new media technologies. Nevertheless, such a sense of obligation does not ensure the effective use of the medium. On the contrary, Peroutková’s data show that politicians often do not know what is expected of them in relation to this medium – whether they should use it for promotion, self-presentation, or communication with citizens.

NEW MEDIA IN ELECTION CAMPAIGNS

Politicians thus often involve new media in their activities. Nevertheless, the adoption of new media does not tell us a lot about politicians’ communication and, hence, we must also ask: What characterizes politicians’ communication using new media? What is the difference (if any) between this “new” way of communication and the “old” ways of using “traditional” media? Can we qualitatively identify new aspects of political communication that are the consequence of the use of new media? Kruikemeier, van Noort, & Vliegenthart (2013) point out that the use of new media is closely connected to the personalization of political communication, which has a positive influence on people’s engagement. Candidates now have their own low-cost channel for communicating on their own behalf, a place where they present themselves directly to citizens and some even refer to the “intimization” of

political communication (Stanyer, 2013). Another attribute that can support engagement is interactivity, which encourages two-way communication and the exchange of information between politicians and citizens. However, this does not happen often. Many Czech politicians use new media primarily for one-way communication in the course of a campaign, or for strictly formal communication, particularly for disseminating information about developments in their parties. Such use, highly motivated by campaigning purposes, is probably most visible when politicians direct contents to citizens as part of pre-election activities and outside campaign periods.

“Let’s discuss” the campaign

Our analysis of candidates’ SNS contents in the Czech presidential elections showed that they did not use Facebook to present their opinions and connect with citizens. On the contrary, candidates’ profiles/fan pages were more akin to information channels about the campaign itself, emphasizing information about events, reports from the media, or invitations to join the campaign. A surprisingly small segment of communication was devoted to the candidate him/herself (Table 1). Even though some posts included a higher share of a candidate’s statements, when analyzing the content of these statements in greater detail, we found that, on average, only every seventh statement was devoted to political issues, problems, or topical events (Štětka, Macková, & Fialová, 2014). There could be several explanations for this. Firstly, the campaign period was very short, some candidates were non-politicians, and some of them did not use SNS before, so they did not have time to build an audience and develop a communication strategy. Secondly, the power of the Czech president is relatively limited, and his/her smaller agenda can thus explain why only a few topics were communicated. And the most general reason (not limited to this election) is that the Czech electoral system is centered on parties rather than candidates.²³ We cannot really talk about a distinct tradition of pre-election clashes between politicians.

23 Apart from the presidential election, it is only the Senate election that is strictly candidate centered. However, in recent years there has been a trend toward strengthening the candidate’s position by implementing (or strengthening) the principles of preferential voting.

Table 1*Content of posts by presidential candidates on Facebook.*

Candidate	Candidate's statements (%)	Promotion and campaign (%)	Information (%)	Others (%)	Number of posts
Bobošíková	32.0	34.0	34.0	-	97
Dienstbier	21.2	42.4	35.4	1.0	99
Fischer	40.3	42.9	11.7	5.2	77
Fischerová	12.6	66.3	18.6	2.5	285
Franz	15.9	47.3	31.9	4.9	182
Roithová	22.5	62.5	15.0	-	40
Sobotka	44.4	41.3	12.7	1.6	63
Schwarzenberg	38.3	48.9	9.2	3.5	141
Zeman	25.0	59.4	14.1	1.6	64
Schwarzenberg – 2nd round	18.9	71.7	7.5	1.9	96
Zeman – 2nd round	42.7	52.1	3.1	2.1	53
Total (%)	25.6	52.6	19.3	2.6	
N	306	629	231	31	1197

Source: Štětka, Macková, & Fialová, 2014.

The above mentioned issue of intimidation (i.e., exposing private information) does not seem to materialize in our cases. It seems that Czech politicians tend to be rather cautious when disclosing private matters (Peroutková, 2014). Strategies founded on a personal approach or openness (both content wise as well as an actual engagement with new media) seem to be scarce among Czech politicians and, hence, we cannot talk about a new trend in political communication.

Sure, as soon as you make something public you can't keep it from spreading everywhere you can think of, you know... it's like a needless opening up of private space, of privacy. (Senator, male)

(Respondent, as cited in Peroutková, 2014)

During the Pre-Election Period

New media effectively opens a direct communication channel with citizens and that channel is permanent, exceeding concentrated communication in the pre-election period. However, politicians communicated much more on Facebook during the election campaign than three months earlier (Figure 3).

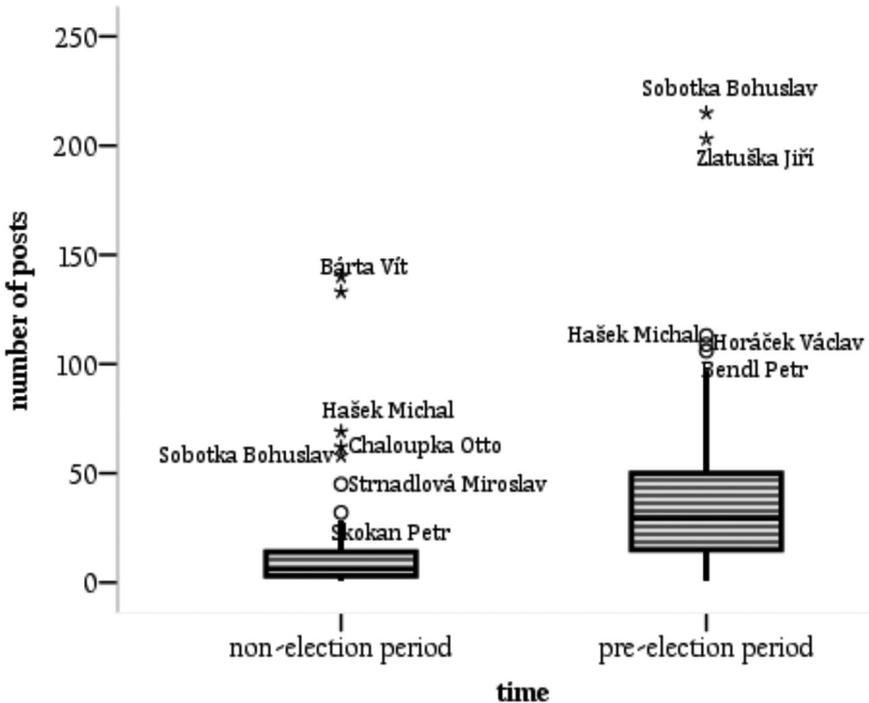


Figure 3: Deputies' use of Facebook in non-election and pre-election periods. Source: Author.

The share of active Facebook profiles or fan pages also illustrates the difference in politicians' communication in non-election and pre-election periods. In fact, in a non-election period the proportion of inactive profiles in the total number of deputies' Facebook profiles was 45% compared to 28% in a pre-election period.²⁴ It is obvious that many politicians not only created their profiles/fan

²⁴ By "inactive" we mean a profile/fan page that did not demonstrate any activity during a monthlong period (or longer) or posts were set as private.

pages because of elections but they also intensified their communication in a pre-election period.

Let me confess, I did it for the elections. So that's how I somehow joined Facebook before the elections. I felt this more of an obligation than my own desire. (Senator, male)

I created my website in the year 2009, which was before senate elections in which I was going to fight for my seat. And I joined Facebook for opportunistic reasons, to use it as a tool in the election fight. (Senator, male) (Respondents, as cited in Peroutková, 2014)

NEW MEDIA DO NOT CONNECT

Thus, Czech politicians use new media, or rather Facebook, which has been the main focus of our research, as a campaigning tool rather than a tool for building and maintaining a long-term relationship with voters and, hence, overcoming a democratic gap between politicians and citizens, as suggested by Graham, Broersma, & Hazelhoff (2013). However, these authors show in their study on Twitter that, despite optimistic expectations, Twitter does not bridge the communication gap between elites and ordinary citizens because interaction, which is a precondition of discussion among users, is low on the

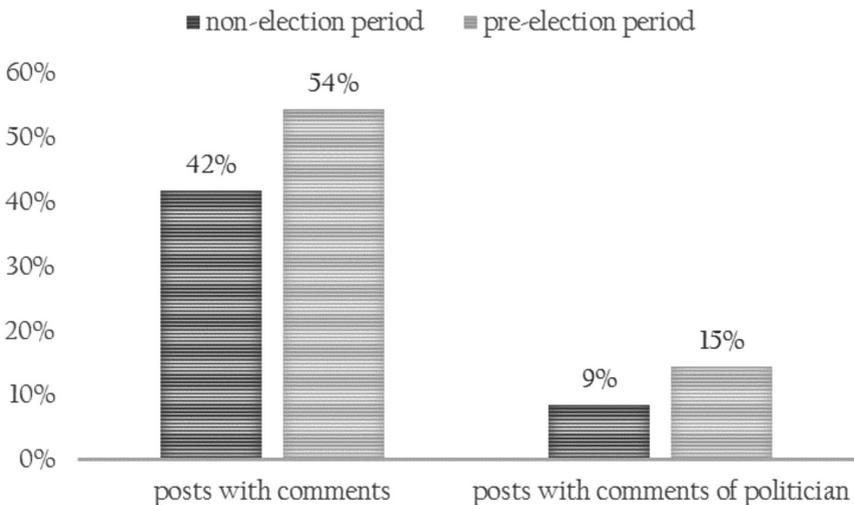


Figure 4: Responsiveness on deputies' Facebook fan pages/profiles in non-election and pre-election periods. Source: Author.

part of political representatives. Also, generally speaking, Czech deputies often do not join discussions related to their own Facebook posts (Figure 4) apart from a small group in our sample who actively participated in discussions on SNS, and that same group of politicians also produced the vast majority of comments in our sample.

Many of them are more likely to avoid online discussions for many reasons, including lack of time or unwillingness to join discussions in general. A mistrust of new media or perceived weak spots and threats that politicians associate with new technologies are other main reasons (Nilsson & Carlsson, 2013).

... Young consultants tell me that Facebook should be more interactive than I perceive it...but let me get this straight; I actually see the political profile as a different form of my website...But a person does not have sufficient physical and mental energy to keep doing this every day.. (Senator, male)

Well, Facebook is just flooded with fake profiles, there are many guerillas out there on Facebook and I'm just not gonna waste my time on people who don't actually exist or on some interns... (Deputy, male)
(Respondents as cited in Peroutková, 2014)

Thus, a more conservative attitude to new technologies seems to dominate in Czech institutional politics. Even though politicians use SNS, their communication often remains predominantly one way, i.e., they talk at, rather than with, other users. It is rare to see an effort at involving more citizens in both online and offline activities and at getting feedback from citizens; this, however, does not mean that such efforts are completely absent.

Still Some Hope?

Politician-users who like communicating on SNS are an exception. They enjoy this type of communication and their profile or fan page on SNS serves as a place for advice, a discussion forum for feedback from citizens, or an arena for rehearsing argumentation for the media or further debates with other citizens or politicians.

...the discussions below my posts are pretty extensive, I sometimes even have 100 posts, which is a lot, and I am, as a matter of fact, interested in those opinions that disagree with my post more than those that agree. Because that tells me what my potential or actual political opponents think and I can get my arguments ready based on Facebook as well. (Senator, male)

And I have to admit that I enjoy it a lot because I get feedback from people out there, which helps me improve my arguments that I can, for example, use when negotiating with ministers or when dealing with other participants when trying to get the point across. (Deputy, female)
(Respondents, as cited in Peroutková, 2014)

These politicians appreciate the speed and openness of new media and the ability to overcome distance, which can be very helpful for prominent politicians. Although these politicians are aware of the limitations of new media, these are outweighed by their advantages. They are able to turn the disadvantages associated, for example, with critical comments or aggressive argumentation in their favor. This enthusiasm, however, can be seen only in the case of politicians who use SNS for discussions with other users, and those who are generally more open to direct confrontation and two-way communication rather than among those who use these media primarily for campaigning.

CONCLUSION

Even though the potential of new media to involve those less visible in mainstream mass media in public debate has been discussed widely (Dahlgren, 2013), this chapter focused on the connection between established political actors and citizens. Even established political actors – who are already visible in mainstream media – can easily profit from the offerings of new media and, besides, they are, unlike marginal actors, at an advantage in terms of financial and other sources (Rethmeyer, 2007) so this may lead to their faster adoption and more effective use of new media.

The aim of this chapter was to provide a summary of our team's research and outline general trends in the use of new media, especially SNS (i.e., Facebook), by prominent Czech politicians. We were interested not only in whether politicians use new media but also how they do so. In other words, we wanted to explore whether politicians in our sample can use new media to re-establish a relationship with citizens, and also whether new media use can help bridge the gap between political elites and other citizens (and users) who are represented by these elites.

Similar to the findings of Graham, Broersma, and Hazelhoff (2013) and Grant, Mood, and Grant (2010) our research does not support Coleman's optimistic assumptions (2005; Coleman & Moss, 2008) that new media are able to effectively connect politicians with citizens and bring advantages to both. Our research indicates that even though the adoption of new media is relatively widespread among Czech politicians, they frequently cannot be considered

routine users; their use of new media is usually more careful and reserved. Instead of connecting with citizens and getting feedback, politicians often remain isolated in their profiles or on online SNS that, as our data indicate, many of them use especially as a one-way campaigning tool. Although we can find some exceptions – politicians who have truly adopted new media and use it to communicate openly and regularly with citizens, including during non-election periods – many of them are rather discouraged because they do not trust media or are unable to accept the rules or, indeed, learn them.

Moreover, the fact that the online presence of most Czech politicians is largely ignored and their social media presence does not help them engage citizens is probably not due only to the politicians' inability to use this media. It is more likely due to the fact that most Czechs do not care much about candidates, unlike citizens in strongly candidate-centered political systems such as the United States – as Nielsen and Vaccari (2013) and Karlsen (2010) note. Only 3% of adult Czechs followed or friended politicians on SNS in 2014, which does not seem to be strong motivation for politicians to adopt this media as they would reach too few voters to make a difference. Hence, we can conclude, in line with Karlsen (2011) and Miller (2013), that new media can be more useful tools for some candidates in some countries, but, at the moment in the Czech Republic, these communicative channels are less effective or useful, although they potentially offer new opportunities for direct contact with voters – at least for some of politicians and some citizens.

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