

# FRENCH POLITICS AT THE DIGITAL AGE

## Did Social Media really change the Presidential Campaign of 2007

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In France, a blog surfaces every 3 seconds. For some observers, France arrives second in the total number of blogs, just behind the USA.<sup>2</sup> Hence, during the 2007 campaign countless internet blogs, news portals, websites, and virtual discussion spaces, entirely dedicated to the presidential election, opened and multiplied. 40% of Internet surfers, i.e. 20% of the French, declared that information they find on the Web would influence their vote.<sup>3</sup> Hence, for the first time in French politics, the election's course and possibly its outcome between Ségolène Royal and Nicolas Sarkozy could have been decided on the Web. In parallel, the 2007 presidential campaign saw the surfacing in France of a new-fledged 'e-marketing' or 2.0 marketing.<sup>4</sup> This paper shall thereby depict how the involved political parties learned how to adapt their marketing techniques to the Social Media. It will therefore look at the new range

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2 M. Latz, *L'avènement du blog*, *Libération*, 23 February 2007.

3 [http://www.supportersdesarkozy.com/content/sur\\_le\\_net.php](http://www.supportersdesarkozy.com/content/sur_le_net.php)

4 A. Dufour, *Cybermarketing*, coll. « Que sais-je? », Paris : P.U.F., 1997.

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of web-based political communication such as electronic adhesion campaigns or party-driven guerrilla actions within the ‘blogosphere’.

Examining the potential societal implications of Social Media, the paper aims to assess how political parties dealt with the emergence of *Mass Self Communication*,<sup>1</sup> and how Social Media may have led to a transformation of political activism with the emergence of a new type of ‘agenda setting dynamic’, based on the notion of ‘two-step flow’, formerly introduced by Lazarsfeld et Katz<sup>2</sup> – i.e., a new Social Media driven dynamic.

Furthermore, the paper will highlight how Social Media closed a breach within the political communication toolbox with, for instance, the relay of famous bloggers campaigning for a particular candidate or as windows on the ‘inner-self’, boosting up the trustworthiness of politicians struggling to demonstrate their sympathy or to communicate genuine emotions. The paper shall therefore evaluate how political parties may have taken advantage of Social Media to foster new allegiances and moreover, how Social Media helped candidates gain considerable recognition, initiating an unprecedented support wave. The paper shall thereby observe how Social Media allowed new dissemination channels for political advertisement, instead of constituting the keystone of a genuine 2.0 revolution in political socialisation.

### **UMP e-marketing**

Undoubtedly, the UMP – Nicolas Sarkozy’s party<sup>3</sup> – appeared to be particularly advanced in terms of e-marketing. Coordinated by Arnaud Dassier, son of Jean-Claude Dassier, chief executive of LCI,<sup>4</sup> and endowed with a 1.5 million Euro budget, Sarkozy’s e-marketing strategy was committed in seducing the digital generation through a pioneering use of the new technologies. With the purpose of mobilising activists, the party sent text messages (SMS) to all affiliates informing

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1 M. Castells, *Emergence des « médias de masse individuels »*, *Le Monde diplomatique*, August 2006, pp. 16-17.

2 E. Katz, *The two-step flow of communication: an up-to-date report of an hypothesis*, in Enis & Cox (eds.), *Marketing Classics*, 1973, pp 175-193.

3 Union for a Popular Movement (*Union pour un Mouvement Populaire*)

4 The French leading private news television channel. <http://tf1.lci.fr/>

them about Sarkozy's TV appearances, such as on the TF1 8'o clock news. Likewise, the party inserted videos of the candidate's discourses on *dailymotion* and invested about 10.000 euros per month in sponsored weblinks.<sup>1</sup>

The UMP innovated with the purchase of sponsored links during the 'banlieue' riots in 2005, making use of Google's *Adwords* device which allows displaying ads on Google search results. Through the use of keywords such as 'violence', 'riots', 'banlieue', "burned cars", or 'racaille' in Google, specific links appeared, directly pointing towards the official UMP website.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, the party purchased names of famous left-wing personalities such as Jack Lang in order to ameliorate its online traffic. The Socialist party decided to counter this aggressive strategy through a hostile 'click campaign' against UMP sponsored links, launched by the *Parti-socialiste.fr* website. The strategy aims to "pollute the online traffic on the UMP website, which will face some issues to determine if internet surfers turned up by conviction or by hostility". The instigators hoped that the outlay of this operation for the UMP, invoiced for each single click on sponsored links, would turn out to be sufficiently dissuasive.<sup>3</sup>

Hence, a significant trend in today's political advertising is the increasing use by candidates, either challengers or incumbents, of negative political advertising.<sup>4</sup> Google's *Adwords* device was therefore also used to delegitimise political opponents. The procedure was firstly used to promote a video excerpt from 1999 in which Pierre Bourdieu considered Ségolène Royal as being "right-wing".<sup>5</sup> Later, in November 2006,

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1 F. Grenier, *Nicolas Sarkozy reçoit chaque semaine une synthèse des opinions exprimées sur les blogs*, *Le Journal du Net*, 30 November 2006, at <http://www.journaldunet.com/itws/it-solere.shtml>

2 E. Dumout, *L'UMP renchérit sur «racaille» pour soutenir Sarkozy via Google*, *ZDNet France*, 7 November 2005, at <http://www.zdnet.fr/actualites/internet/0,39020774,39285264,00.htm>

3 *Marketing politique: le PS lance une campagne de clics contre le site de l'UMP*, *ZDNet France*, 15 February 2006. <http://www.zdnet.fr/actualites/internet/0,39020774,39311658,00.htm?xtor=1>

4 W.H. Chang, J.-J. Park, & S.W. Shim, *Effectiveness of Negative Political Advertising*, *Web Journal of Mass Communication Research*, 2:1, December 1998, <http://www.scripps.ohiou.edu/wjmcr/vol02/2-1a.HTM>

5 L. Blecher, *D'outré-tombe, Bourdieu dézingue Ségolène Royal*, *Libération*, 5 October 2006.

all web searches referring to ‘Ségolène’, ‘Royal’ or ‘video’ lead to a sequence broadcasted on *dailymotion* in which Ségolène Royal criticised secondary school teachers. In the list of websites suggested by Google, the first two were sponsored links. The party denied the responsibility for these links even though it openly admitted the purchase of keywords such as ‘Jack Lang’, ‘Ségolène Royal’ or ‘racaille’.<sup>1</sup> The same ‘Googlebombing’ procedure has helped to dispatch the quote “I don’t like rich people” uttered by François Hollande, first secretary of the French Socialist Party (PS) and, still at that time, husband of the socialist candidate. According to Thierry Solère, co-responsible for Sarkozy’s web-strategy during the 2007 campaign, and now national secretary of the UMP in charge of Internet; this affair constituted “an incredible example of *virality*: people obtaining the electronic message transmitting it immediately to their friends.”<sup>2</sup> Markedly, the affair eventually led to the publication of the patrimony of Ségolène Royal.

The same strategy was used by the UMP to create a positive buzz, i.e. to spread a video recalling Sarkozy’s decisive role in the hostage crisis in Neuilly-sur-Seine in May 1993. The video “Sarkozy Human Bomb”, was uploaded by UMP activists on *YouTube* and *dailymotion* with intent to remind and promote the heroic features of the candidate. An E-mail targeting supporters of Sarkozy’s candidacy, encouraged the latter to give the highest mark to this video, add it as favourite and provide some commentaries. As a result, the video came in first position on *dailymotion* and *YouTube* ensuring considerable visibility. What could at first constitute an anecdote lead to a matter of dispute within the blogosphere. In fact, the UMP provoked an artificial buzz around the video, thereby going against ethic rules in vigour on the Web – in particular against the ‘Nethique’ code of conduct, co-signed by the PS, the UDF<sup>3</sup> and Royal’s platform *Désirs d’avenir*.

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1 O. Zilbertin, *L’UMP dément avoir fait de la publicité des vidéos sur Ségolène Royale diffusées par Internet*, *Le Monde*, 15 November 2006.

2 T. Solère quoted in S. Laurent, *D’une rumeur sur Internet à l’évènement de campagne*, *Le Figaro*, 19 January 2007.

3 The Union for French Democracy (*Union pour la Démocratie Française*, UDF) was a French centrist political party. The UDF effectively ceased to exist by the end of 2007, and its membership and assets were transferred to its successor party, the Democratic Movement (MoDem). [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Union\\_for\\_French\\_Democracy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Union_for_French_Democracy)

### E-adhesion campaigns

In 2004, the UMP orchestrated an e-mailing operation whose objective was to progress from 110.000 partisans to 250.000 till the end of 2006, and to establish a database with more than 100.000 addresses in view of the 2007 elections.<sup>1</sup> Over the past years, the party continuously updated and categorised this email database in line with people's interests. Hence, in fall 2005, more than 2 million internet users received an E-mail with the following heading: "Nicolas Sarkozy has a message for you". The UMP also addressed 150.000 emails to people who expressed themselves on the party's website during the *banlieue* crisis in favour of Nicolas Sarkozy's action. This e-mailing campaign represented an investment of approximately 1.5 million Euros, i.e. close to 5% of the total budget of the party.<sup>2</sup> As such, the UMP rented databases of electronic addresses and spammed 3 millions citizens in total. This effort represented the first French web-based recruiting campaign with two times more impact than any mailing for commercial advertisement.<sup>3</sup> The party claimed that as a direct result 30.000 new people joined the movement. It thus appears that a lot of people actually did bother to click on the link rather than hit the delete button.

French political parties thus found an increasing interest in electronic adhesion prior to the 2007 Campaign. As a matter of fact, Internet represented the perfect tool to attract new members. The PS launched a web-based recruitment of militants in March 2006. Strikingly, the PS registered 5000 new adhesions only three days following the launch. As a result, while in March 2006, the PS counted a total of 130.000 members, in June of the same year, the total number reached 200.000.<sup>4</sup> Following this recruitment wave, the PS had to redraft its militant cartography with a greater amount of young, graduate and urban members, as well as a greater percentage of female affiliates. Hence, this disproportionate rush of new militants has shaken the PS' inner geopolitics; Paris became the new leading countrywide federation, dethroning the traditionally powerful northern federations. Moreover, it is here worth

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1 A. Delcayre, *L'UMP secoue le cocotier du marketing politique*, *Stratégies*, n° 1384, 6 October 2005.

2 *Ibid.*

3 M. Bénilde, *Le marketing viral de la droite française*, *Le Monde diplomatique*, September 2006, p. 23.

4 *Le Figaro*, *Le PS affiche 200.000 militants*, 1 June 2006.

mentioning that new members adhering prior the first of June 2006 gained the right to participate in the first organised socialist primaries. As such, one might presuppose that the 70.000 new affiliated members may have contributed to the subsequent *Ségomania* giving rise to Ségolène Royal as the foremost web-candidate.<sup>1</sup>

### Désirs d'avenir

Amongst French socialists, Dominique Strauss-Kahn was the first to demonstrate some genuine interest in Social Media. As 2.0 pioneer, he was the first to open a political blog, organising *meet-ups*, i.e. dragging bloggers out of their virtual dimension and engaging with them in open debates. However, despite the precursory launch of Strauss-Kahn's blog in February 2004, Ségolène Royal managed to catch up her delay and even surpass the future IMF Managing Director through the idea of 'participative democracy' and through a key branding apparatus; the innovative website '*Désirs d'avenir*' launched on the 8 February 2006.<sup>2</sup> Throughout her internal campaign within the PS related to the firstly held socialist primaries and later, as unique contender of the French Socialist party, Ségolène Royal appeared as a genuine 2.0 Web entrepreneur declaring from the beginning on, that 50% of the campaign would take place on the Internet. Hence, the candidate put down the premises for a pioneering 2.0 practice of democracy. According to a case study performed by XiTiMonitor; an online barometer analysing the searches of internet surfers, by means of *Désirs d'avenir*, Ségolène dominated the cyberpolitical market throughout the campaign and till the first turn of the presidential elections.<sup>3</sup>

Noticeably, Ségolène Royal had no existing network within the Socialist Party and therefore had to build up virtual networks.<sup>4</sup> With spontaneous initiatives such as *Segosphere.net*, a website of young

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1 *Journal du Net*, interview with Vincent Feltesse : « Je suis très sceptique sur l'efficacité des liens sponsorisés », 6 December 2006, at <http://www.journaldu.net.com/itws/it-feltesse.shtml>

2 <http://www.desirsdavenir.org/>

3 2007 Presidential Elections: the subjects of most interest to Internet users concerning the 4 candidates leading the polls, at <http://www.xitimonitor.com/en-us/focus-on-current-events/the-2007-presidential-elections-february-2007/index-1-2-1-75.html>

4 S. Dreyfus, *La "blogosphère" a attiré des milliers de sympathisants PS*, *La Croix*, 15 November 2006.

supporters, several satellites of *Désirs d'avenir* were launched outside the PS galaxy without being systematically linked to the party. An internal network with tight strings thus emerged around *Désirs d'avenir*, shaped by concentric circles. The message transmitted from peer to peer, answered to the principle of viral communication, endorsing Royal's discourse with credibility.<sup>1</sup> However, debates were generally inexistent on these supporter blogs; the leitmotiv within the 'Segosphere' being to pass on the message, with a strong tendency towards activist endogamy. With links from one blog to another, the objective of this swarm of supporters was to occupy the virtual landscape, thereby ensuring a greater visibility to the candidate's website within search engines; "the more links referring to *Désirs d'avenir*, the better the referencing in search engines such as Google".<sup>2</sup>

While some contributors confessed their addiction to Royal's Social Media platform,<sup>3</sup> Jacques Séguéla, famous French publicist following successful political campaigns for François Mitterrand in the Eighties argued that *Désirs d'avenir* constituted the first feminine political website.<sup>4</sup> With an embroidered blue background of light clouds, the website at first astonishes and clashes with its celestial touch. The chromatic shape of *Désirs d'avenir* is indeed strongly contrasting with the customary reddish standards of the PS; a definite sign that a new 'product' has thus here been proposed. More than a static façade, the website continuously evolved in line with the pace of the campaign, capable of transmitting chromatically the latest tone of the candidate. As a matter of fact, a few weeks before the first turn, the website abandoned its welcoming and peaceful sky-blue tapestry to show off a new reinforced concrete looking background. The refurbishment of the website became thus emblematic of an imminent change in the style of political confrontation at that very moment of the campaign, which entered a new phase.

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1 S. Magnant quoted in Dreyfus, *La "blogosphère" a attiré des milliers de sympathisants PS*, *op. cit.*

2 G. Fouetillou quoted in Dreyfus, *La "blogosphère" a attiré des milliers de sympathisants PS*, *op. cit.*

3 Cf. M. Lévy, *Pour Royal, le bonheur est dans le Web*, *Libération*, 5 February 2007.

4 J. Séguéla & T. Saussez, *La prise de l'Élysée: Les campagnes présidentielles de la Ve République*, Paris: Plon, 2007, p. 242.

Hence, Ségolène Royal designed her virtual window not like a cosmetic media solely intended to enrich an already formatted speech, but as the very heart of the political project. An example of this unprecedented understanding of politics was the development of an interactive e-book, progressively and collectively written by means of Web Surfers' contributions on *Désirs d'avenir* – an e-book which meant to become Ségolène Royal's presidential programme, resulting in 100 concrete propositions.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, since its launch, the content uploaded on *Désirs d'Avenir* has been put under the “Creative Commons” licence.<sup>2</sup> The tools and technologies used during the campaign point towards an open approach of digital culture founded on sharing, cooperation and exchange. The choice has equally been made to privilege the tools used by ordinary Internet users rather than investing in pricy platforms. The website therefore functions entirely with free software. Remarkably, as an answer to *Désirs d'Avenir*, the website of the Socialist Party has been updated as a 2.0 Social Media platform, developed in Ajax<sup>3</sup>, and conceived as a customised user interface such as the platform Netvibes<sup>4</sup> with dynamic content such as Dailymotion videos, pictures on Flickr, wordpress blogs and RSS web feeds.

### The participative ideology

Overall, one might argue that political parties and candidates' websites represent windows opening up to the internal life of the movement; they mirror a particular ideology and *modus operandi*. It may thus not be surprising if participative and user-friendly platforms have firstly emerged on left-wing blogs and party homepages. In Royal's view, one should trust the ‘collective intelligence’ resulting from participative processes, the word should be given to ‘citizens-experts’ rather than to the politically trained ‘better-knower’; a conception which for

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1 *Libération*, *Les 100 propositions de Ségolène Royal*, 12 February 2007.

2 <http://fr.creativecommons.org/>

3 AJAX (Asynchronous JavaScript and XML), or Ajax, is a group of inter-related web development techniques used for creating interactive web applications. A primary characteristic is the increased responsiveness and interactivity of web pages achieved by exchanging small amounts of data with the server “behind the scenes” so that entire web pages do not have to be reloaded each time there is a need to fetch data from the server. This is intended to increase the web page's interactivity, speed, functionality, and usability. See Wikipedia article at

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ajax\\_%28programming%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ajax_%28programming%29)

4 <http://www.netvibes.com/>

some observers prefigured the premises of a 2.0 practice of Democracy. As indicated by Michel Rocard, former Socialist Prime Minister in charge of a Report on a '2.0 Republic' transmitted to Ségolène Royal in April 2007 i.e., 94 propositions determining a governmental plan on digital technologies; "technical choices are also political choices!"<sup>1</sup> It is therefore worth mentioning that Nicolas Sarkozy, likewise projected to "initiate a numerical Republic" (*Fonder la République numérique*)<sup>2</sup>, a pledge in favour of E-Democracy in which he suggested associating the Nation to public decisions; "I shall install a forum of permanent dialogue endowed with the broadest possible representation".<sup>3</sup>

### Intimate politics

Beyond the attempt to redynamise French democracy, the value given to the collective intelligence of citizen-experts also demonstrates the necessity for representatives and parties to tackle the decline of public confidence in politicians. In the two last decades, electoral abstention, spoilt ballots, negative opinion polls, anti-incumbent voting and support for extremist or fringe parties have been tracing the graph of mounting dissatisfaction with a political provision that has been lacking in renewal, bold reform and, to a large extent, honesty.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, the enrolment of citizen-experts and the plea for participative democracy clearly point towards the search for remedy against political disaffection and the deficit of legitimacy experienced by the French political class.

While parties cannot be authentic, individuals can. Closing the gap between private and public sphere, Social Media enable representatives to circumvent the traditional channels of political discourse as well as their established affiliations. In other words, Social Media endorse politicians with the possibility to disconnect with their political daily reality, i.e. with party politics and protocolary obligations, enabling suppor-

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1 Cf. M. Rocard, *République 2.0 - Vers une société de la connaissance ouverte*, Rapport remis à Ségolène Royal le 5 avril 2007, p. 78. [http://www.temps-reels.net/IMG/pdf/rocard\\_republique\\_2.0.pdf](http://www.temps-reels.net/IMG/pdf/rocard_republique_2.0.pdf)

2 Cf. *Le Journal du Net, Tribune de Nicolas Sarkozy : « La France à l'ère numérique »*, 20 April 2007, at <http://www.journaldunet.com/diaporama/070420-net-nicolas-sarkozy-france-ere-numerique/index.shtml>

3 *Ibid.*

4 J.G. Shields, *Political Representation in France: A Crisis of Democracy?*, *Parliamentary Affairs* Vol. 59 No. 1, 2006, 118–137.

ters to hook up with their 'inner-self', thus adding some extra layers of emotionality and intimacy to politics. Internet users are hereby incited to engage in a privileged relationship with unconventionally emotionally-loaded candidates. In search of immediate proximity with their electorate outside the partisan prism, politicians are thus using Social Media to deliver a message of empathy thereby willingly blurring the distance between their electorate and themselves. The impact on the traditional political communication is therefore substantial. As stressed by Daniel Bounoux, we do not currently suffer from too many obstacles between us and political institutions or discourses, but from the lack of distance.<sup>1</sup>

The upload of individualised New Year's wishes on Social Media platforms such as *YouTube* or *Dailymotion*, which recently became very fashionable, represents a tip-off of this ongoing personalisation process. Broadcasted on *Dailymotion*, the 2007 new years' wishes of Ségolène Royal lead to a noticeable confrontation of styles. While Nicolas Sarkozy traditionally appeared in front of a plain blue background with an incrustated UMP logo, Royal performed her speech in an immaculate room, illuminated by a Kartell designer table lamp. Sitting on her white chair, Royal did not once mention the Socialist Party during her three minutes-long intervention, confirming her free-floating nature within the blogosphere.

### **Organised e-activism**

At first sight, Social Media opened new communicating channels and encouraged what appeared a revitalisation of political debates. Yet, with the development of Social Media, parties seized the opportunity to attract a declining audience; coaching, active enrolment and the exchange of best practices thereby constituted key objectives. Hence, while Ségolène Royal incessantly praised the 'collective intelligence' of her online supporters; one has witnessed an emerging 'e-activism' during the 2007 presidential campaign.

With recent developments allowing the transmission of polls and images at low costs, internet progressively became a powerful adver-

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. D. Bounoux, *La crise de la représentation*, Paris : La Découverte, 2006.

tising media, enabling and facilitating interactions between representatives detaining a political offer and citizen-consumers – the ultimate goal being to transform Social Media users in stable politicised ‘clients’ i.e., build up customer loyalty and foster new relays of politicisation to maximise the political ascendancy on the Web. Social Media users thereby become promoters of the political message and main protagonists of a marketing strategy that has been used throughout the Presidential campaign by both major contenders.

### **Sarkozy’s cyber-supporters**

As regards e-proselytising, Sarkozy’s message was spread by self-appointed ‘cyber-supporters’ by means of a leading Social Media platform: *supportersdesarkozy.com*. Through this platform, the UMP provided political communication guidelines for the utmost display of the political brand. As a result, cyber-supporters were motivated to commit to a daily deed intended to reinforce the network around their candidate.<sup>1</sup> The UMP website also recommended cyber-supporters to leave comments on other political platforms and to create web links redirecting to sympathetic websites in order to generate traffic and a maximised occurrence on search engines.

In addition to specific guidelines intending to improve the spreading of ideas, the UMP also delivered custom-made communication tools such as ready-to-use partisan websites. Since 2006, the party had purposely set up a blogging space on the UMP website with links to hundreds of political blogs. Following an investment strategy thoroughly developed by Arnaud Dassier, Managing Director of *l’Enchanteur des nouveaux medias* and Internet service provider of the party, these blogs were designed to endorse activists with the opportunity “to give free course to their personal political engagement” thereby creating an impulsion around the ideas of the candidate and increasing “the presence and visibility of the UMP on the Internet”.<sup>2</sup> As a result, at the end of 2006, 225.000 UMP members got hold of a pedagogic video via E-Mail, advising them how to launch their own political blog by means of a free *Typepad* platform provided by the party. Another

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1 *Le Figaro, Le sprint final des cybermilitants*, 6 April 2007.

2 T. Solère quoted in *Blog partie chez Sarkozy, Libération*, 21 August 2006.

website proposed to download documents and banners in order to relay the 'Sarko Brand' via e-mail and blogs.<sup>1</sup>

While commercial brands seek more and more to engage in a closer relationship with consumers via Internet and Social Media, this form of 'participative advertisement' entered a new dimension. According to Wendy Harris Millard, long-time chief sales officer of *Yahoo!*, "the Internet surfer is not only a programmer but also a creator and a dispenser of content".<sup>2</sup> Likewise, during the 2007 presidential campaign, most parties fostered a wide-ranging branding effort, following a precise graphic Charta for each different candidate. In 2006, a *Mediametrie* study<sup>3</sup> calculated an amount of more than 14 millions active partakers in forums and 3.5 millions web content creators (blog, video) in France,<sup>4</sup> and thus, as many potential online helpers for the party's visibility. Through websites, spamming campaigns, promotional links (*adwords*) and banners, the similarity with commercial e-marketing is increasingly distinguishable.

### **Ségolène's Netscouade**

The 2.0 conception of her campaign did not restrain Ségolène Royal from a disciplined implementation of her efforts on the Web. At Royal's headquarters, 15 people constituting the '*Netscouade*' (Web squad) in command of the 'Ségo' brand, were in charge of feeding *Désirs d'avenir*, scanning the Internet 10 hours per day, observing major trends within the campaign, and informing the candidate of Web surfers' reactions.<sup>5</sup> 70 'mods' (moderators-synthesisers) i.e. benevolent supporters identified major trends amongst 130.000 contributions posted on the website by approximately 55.000 contributors in total. The most popular themes were "the economy and labour" (8600 postings) and the position of

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1 <http://www.supportersdesarkozy.com/home>

2 L. Girard, *Avec Internet, la publicité « participative » gagne du terrain*, *Le Monde*, 22 June 2007.

3 Médiamétrie carries on its Internet and New Media activities through a range of studies and services which permit all participants in the new economy to distinguish the trends in the sector more clearly. <http://www.mediametrie.com>

4 F. Vignal, *Quand la webcampagne chamboule la com' politique*, *Marianne*, 26 November 2006, <http://www.marianne2.fr/index.php?action=article&numero=287>

5 *Libération*, *Comment la «Netscouade» de Ségolène Royal veille sur la campagne*, 5 April 2007.

“France in the world” (6000 postings).<sup>1</sup> As a result, each morning Ségolène Royal obtained a ‘buzz note’ measuring the opinion’s pulse on the Internet. For the candidate, this daily gauge represented a significant piece of information and monitoring tool. A piece of information systematically analysed and summarised by three full-time collaborators while in parallel, computers were analysing key words on several strategic websites. The *Netscouade* also sketched a map to locate where important debates were taking place in order to perform some effective product placement and to select e-activists with matching profiles, allocating them to hot debating spots.

In addition, beginning of 2007, a socialist activist inaugurated a *Désirs d’avenir* virtual platform on *Second life*; the famous three-dimensional world created by the American company Linden Labs. As a result, the PS launched a blog referring to activist news from the virtual front and the socialist candidate recorded a video message greeting the creation of this ‘748e support committee’.<sup>2</sup> The party declared that *Second Life* constituted an integral part of the communication strategy of Ségolène Royal in order to reach to the youngest layers of the electorate.

### New agenda-Setting

The *Blogopole* platform referenced for the 2007 campaign the totality of websites and citizen blogs feeding the political debate in France i.e. WebPages of representatives, activists, supporters as well as commentators and analysts. The last update of Blogopole added up more than 2000 websites, classified according to their political leaning.<sup>3</sup> As corollary to this scattering of politicised Social Media, television channels sometimes directly took on, or monitored the main talking points displayed on WebPages of well-known bloggers, with hot topics directly drawn from blogs. One could thus determine a centring of the media on the e-citizen i.e. the emergence of the ‘self-media producer’ as new *micro-Medium* on the Internet. Hence, the 2007 elections coincide with a new update of the classic “Two-Step Flow of Communication” theory

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1 L. Blecher, *Les blogueurs se font voir rue de Solférino*, *Libération*, 5 February 2007.

2 <http://sntic.parti-socialiste.fr/2007/01/17/un-comite-desirs-davenir-sur-second-life/>

3 <http://www.observatoire-presidentielle.fr/?pageid=4#Blogopole>

as depicted by Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet in *People's Choice*, in 1944.<sup>1</sup> While previous theories assumed that Media directly reached the target of the information,<sup>2</sup> the study suggest that communication from the mass media first reaches 'opinion leaders' who filter the information they gather to their associates, with whom they are influential. Up-to-date revisions of the theory have been regularly released throughout the past decades such as in 1973 by Elihu Katz,<sup>3</sup> or by Gabriel Weimann and Hans-Bernd Brosius in the Nineties.<sup>4</sup>

In line with these successive reinterpretations, bloggers are here considered as new impulse givers within the agenda setting process performed by the media. Weimann and Brosius defined agenda setting as a two-step flow, wherein certain individuals (influentials) "collect, diffuse, filter, and promote the flow of information" from media to the community.<sup>5</sup> This intermediary role is nowadays endorsed by Social Media animators, with the difference that bloggers may likewise serve as primary source for journalists or be lobbied to include links to print articles of mainstream reporters.<sup>6</sup> Social Media has thus affected the usual 'direction' of the news, promoting the flow of information from the community back to the media, thereby closing the feedback loop. In other words, with the development of Social Media, the classic paradigm of top down news diffusion has started to be turned on its head. According to Pierre Lévy, "public opinion will be more and more shaped in discussion lists, forums, *chat rooms*, networks of interconnected Websites and other devices of communication specific to virtual communities to which traditional media will at most constitute rally points."<sup>7</sup>

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1 P.F. Lazarsfeld, B. Berelson & H. Gaudet, *The people's choice: How the voter makes up his mind in a presidential campaign*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1944.

2 S. Griswold, *The Two-Step Flow of Communication Theory*, at [http://www.ciadvertising.org/studies/student/99\\_spring/theory/griswold/twostep.html](http://www.ciadvertising.org/studies/student/99_spring/theory/griswold/twostep.html)

3 Katz, *The two-step flow of communication: an up-to-date report of an hypothesis op. cit.*

4 G. Weimann, *Is there a two-step flow of Agenda Setting?*, *International Journal of Public Opinion*, v6, n4, 1994, p323.

5 H.B. Brosius & G. Weimann, *Who sets the agenda?: agenda setting as a two-step flow*, *Communication Research*, v23, n5, 1996, pp561-580.

6 L. Gomes, *Tech Blogs Produce New Elite to Help Track The Industry's Issues*, *The Wall Street Journal*, 7 December 2005.

7 P. Lévy, *Cyberdémocratie. Essai de philosophie politique*, Paris : Odile Jacob, 2002,

Courting and convincing these ‘influentials’ to rally their cause appears particularly critical for political parties these days. Parties thereby attempt to significantly increase and diversify their initial targets, and potentially reduce their advertising costs. In some particular cases, parties may even give priority to prominent bloggers over journalists as it is already the case in the industry.<sup>1</sup> One striking example of this is the case of the famous French blogger Loïc Le Meur. In the past years, Le Meur has been qualified as the “neuralgic centre of the French Blogosphere”.<sup>2</sup> During a *podcasted* interview in 2005,<sup>3</sup> Le Meur asked Nicolas Sarkozy if he would proceed like Lionel Jospin who declared himself candidate for the Presidential Elections in 2001 by means of a fax, and make his own candidature public on a blog. Sarkozy considered the proposal as an “excellent idea”, stating he would even envisage doing this announcement on Loïc le Meur’s blog. Sarkozy’s reaction towards Le Meur’s manoeuvre seemed relatively logical; since the emergence of blogs in France, Le Meur has been quoted by more than a million of websites. In 2005, his blog was visited 100.000 times per months, with more than 15.000 comments.<sup>4</sup> After being hired by Sarkozy to orchestrate his online campaign, Le Meur, gathered about 60 bloggers at the UMP congress in January 2007.<sup>5</sup> The aim of the reunion was to endow e-activists with more efficient tools. Le Meur, ‘pope’ of the blogosphere thereby acted as coach for potential influential activists. Hence, aware of the fact that Social Media represent an extraordinary mean to locally identify network leaders inclined to connect thousands of people, Nicolas Sarkozy thus systematically collected the support of bloggers; encouraging them to execute their ‘Sarkoming-out’.

### Did internet change the campaign?

The ‘*Commission nationale des comptes de campagne et des financements politiques*’ (CNCCFP) (national Commission of the accounts

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p. 58.

- 1 Gomes, *Tech Blogs Produce New Elite to Help Track The Industry’s Issues*, *op. cit.*
- 2 L. Dupin, *Loïc Le Meur, blogueur à plein temps*, *ZDNet France*, 21 December 2005. <http://www.zdnet.fr/actualites/internet/0,39020774,39295638,00.htm>
- 3 [http://loiclemeur.com/france/2005/12/nicolas\\_sarkozy\\_1.html](http://loiclemeur.com/france/2005/12/nicolas_sarkozy_1.html)
- 4 O. Blondeau, *Devenir Media : L’activisme Sur Internet, Entre Défection Et Expérimentation*, Paris: Editions Amsterdam/Multitudes, 2007, p. 378.
- 5 S. Laurent, *Les bloggeurs de l’UMP en ordre de bataille*, *Le Figaro*, 14 January 2007.

of political campaigns and financings) received on the 6<sup>th</sup> of July 2007 the final accounts of the candidates' campaigns concerning the last presidential election with one remarkable innovation in 2007: candidates had the obligation to expressly declare their web related expenditures. It thereby came out that Ségolène Royal had the most expensive web campaign. The candidate of the PS, for which 50% of the campaign efforts took place on the Web, spent a total of 866.220€ for web-related expenditures i.e. 4,2 % of her total budget.<sup>1</sup> While a commitment of only 4,2% of the total budget to online communication appears meek, it is however far from being anecdotic as it represents four times the Internet budget of Lionel Jospin in 2002.<sup>2</sup>

Quantifying the web based campaign appears problematical. While any website conceived by a candidate or his party during the election had to be considered, including blogs that have been especially dedicated to the election, supporters' blogs launched before the campaign did not have to be taken into account. Parties therefore only needed to provide the necessary content to improvised e-activists in order to launch a political buzz. Dominique Bertinotti, treasurer of Royal's campaign, therefore argued that the Web has permitted better and cheaper communication than through traditional means.<sup>3</sup>

Social Media also enabled candidates to circumvent the *Conseil supérieur de l'audiovisuel* (CSA), the public institution regulating the content of TV and radio networks, including through eventual censorship. While monitoring the various electronic media in France, such as radio and television, the CSA abandoned any attempt to control the Internet during the campaign. In this context, in April 2007, centrist candidate François Bayrou suggested a Web broadcasted debate, thereby outwitting the strict CSA limitations. Bayrou proposed that all prominent bloggers come together in order to organise a debate between

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1 While the budget included the parti-socialiste.fr, Mjsfrance.org website and the young socialists' website it principally helped to launch and develop an innovative blog platform and two other website entirely dedicated to the candidate; Desirsdavenir.org and Ségosphere.net. *Le Journal du Net, Présidentielle : combien ont coûté les webcampagnes des candidats*, at <http://www.journaldunet.com/ebusiness/internet/dossier/070730-cout-webcampagne-presidentielle/1-strategies-en-chiffres.shtml>

2 *Ibid.*

3 Dominique Bertinotti quoted in *Le Journal du Net, Présidentielle : combien ont coûté les webcampagnes des candidats*, *op. cit.*

Nicolas Sarkozy, Ségolène Royal, Jean-Marie Le Pen and himself. He suggested that “internet should take its responsibilities and create a new democratic area”.<sup>1</sup> While Royal and Le Pen accepted the idea, Sarkozy refused to join in. Nevertheless, a debate which was at first planned on the platform Agoravox,<sup>2</sup> eventually took place between Bayrou and Royal on BFM-TV, a French 24-hour television news channel, broadcasted live on the Web.<sup>3</sup>

## Conclusion

The surfacing of Social Media within the 2007 campaign opened a new battle field for political parties and involved a new set of actors impinging on the agenda of politics and of the media. This paper argued that this new situation also led to the articulation of two different styles of political communication and more strikingly, to the expression of two different conceptions of politics: the top down leadership of Sarkozy – i.e. franchising opinion leaders and endorsing supporters as grassroots political marketers – and the bottom up participative, more horizontal strategy of Ségolène Royal, involving online activists in the shaping of her political program.

In the end, Nicolas Sarkozy won the election. The French voters do not yet constitute proactive armada of bloggers and twitting activists. Sarkozy’s ability to incarnate action and leadership, to be perceived as the true energiser, eventually still mattered. Nevertheless, while Sarkozy became the sixth President of the Fifth Republic, *Désirs d’avenir*, prefigured the premises of 2.0 collaborative politics. Ségolène Royal herewith succeeded with some substantial prospects in the field of political communication; using Social Media to enter in an unprecedented dialogue with her electorate. Strikingly, after the campaign, a move towards a more participative approach has been pursued by the UMP with the creation of an adherents’ network; a numerical federation (developed in Ajax).<sup>4</sup> With reference to Social Media, following the

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1 F. Bayrou quoted in *Bayrou, Royal et Le Pen favorables à un débat sur le Web, Sarkozy opposé*, *Le Monde*, 4 April 2007.

2 [www.agoravox.fr/](http://www.agoravox.fr/)

3 *Libération*, *BFM-TV va diffuser le débat Royal-Bayrou*, 27 April 2007.

4 <http://www.umpnet.org>

momentum of the *Ségosphère*, the UMP and the PS are now moving in the same direction.

Beyond the promising horizon of a new and more democratic approach of politics one may, however, raise the question if Social Media do not rather correspond to new dissemination channels for ‘political brands’ instead of composing the underpinnings of a genuine 2.0 revolution of political socialisation. In fact, this paper stressed that the current participative or collaborative trend also stands for a new way of disseminating and consolidating the authenticity and legitimacy of the representative’s mission through a groundbreaking branding mechanism aiming to build customer loyalty through virtual or real immersive processes. Politicians take herewith a more passive stance, leaving room for the e-citizen to co-construct the message. As such, when during the campaign, the PS invited the 20 key contributors of *Désirs d’avenir*, these citizen-exerts welcomed the inversion which came up in the debate; “citizens being in the centre of stage while Ségolène Royal stays on the side to listen.”<sup>1</sup> By means of *Désirs d’avenir* and participative debates taking place throughout the campaign, millions of citizen-consumers could thus take part in the evolution of the ‘Ségolène’ brand through an internal benchmarking process. Ironically, within the premises of what could symbolise a 2.0 democracy, French Social Media users have, during the 2007 electoral campaign, taken part in the first participative marketing experiment.

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