

Can Facebook Help You Become Mayor? Case Study: Bacău, 2016

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Abstract:

Cleverly used in political communication, Facebook helps candidates to raise their visibility, to directly communicate with the citizens and involve them in creating virtual communities and content in order to virally promote political messages.

In our study we briefly present the way in which Facebook was used, timidly at first, in the election campaign of Bacau from 2012 and 2016.

The importance of the social media during the local elections in this city has slowly but surly increased. In 2012, the presence on Facebook was only an oportunity, much less exploited than television or newspapers. In 2016 all the candidates created their campaign online, some of them exclusively on this social network. However, the success of the 2.0 mayor is not based only on using the social network as (an alternative) news channel, but rather on establishing a bidirectional link and a constant interaction with virtual friends.

Keywords: political communication, election campaign, social media, Bacau, 2016.

1. Social media – introductory concepts

After having been, for many years, a one-way road, the Internet has nowadays turned into an interactive environment that allows users not only to consume information passively but also to generate it. Thousands of users are involved in creating the online encyclopedia Wikipedia, writing blogs, exchanging video materials, music or photos, collaborating, communicating, commenting, evaluating etc. The users' goal is no longer consumption, but generation and distribution of new contents, the newly arrived concept being that of participatory web (Decrem, 2006). This allows for new forms of social interaction and communication organized directly by the users via blogs and social networks. Social communication of the type “a few producing for the many” has been replaced with the “many to many” type of communication, the final result being the creation of a virtual network of people connected on a social and global level (Meckel, 2008, p. 17).

Participatory web or Web 2.0 is defined as a “structure of participation”, a new service that allows the creation of technical and social relations based on knowledge or friendship (O'Reilly, 2005, p. 30), or a “new form of communicative self-organization” (Meckel, 2008, p. 17). With a global coverage scope, being interactive and integrating all the other communication environments, generating a “mass self-communication” (Castells, 2009, p. 65), the Internet has been rediscovered in the Web 2.0 stage and, being an agent of social interaction, changed our culture for ever. The table below illustrates a comparison between Web 2.0 and Web 1.0 (the early years of the World Wide Web) insisting upon its potential of stimulating social interaction. If Web 1.0 means creating a simpler world to send information and draw advertisers, Web 2.0 means creating a collective intelligence, some collaborative networks, and it involves the users participation (Castells, 2009, p.136).

Table 1. Comparison between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 (Müller & Schumann, 2011)

Web 1.0	Web 2.0
“I am online”	“We are the Internet”
Webmaster	Community
Consumer	Prosumer (Producer & Consumer)
Research-buy	Express-connect-share
Interconnected contents	Interconnected people
Preexisting contents	User-generated contents
Read-Web	Read/Write-Web

Web 2.0 is the platform needed for the evolution of social media. It allows for the creation of virtual links among users, with social, commercial, political, educational and cultural applicability. By using communication, social media builds communities, creates and distributes information. Social media may take on several forms, including Internet forums, weblogs, social blogs, microblogging, wikis and podcasts, videos, photos, social bookmarking. Social media is built on three key-elements: the content created by the user, the communities and the web 2.0 technologies (Ahlqvist, Bäck, Halonen & Heinonen, 2008, pp. 13-14). Heinonen & Halonen (2007, p. 6) define social media as tools, spaces and operating modes for the people who interact with each other, create, share, change and comment on the contents of virtual communities and social networks. Kaplan & Haenlein (2010, p. 61) define social media as “a group of online applications which grow on the ideological and technological foundations of web 2.0 and which allow creating and changing the content produced by the users.” In the social media, the information becomes accessible, the users are not mere consumers, but also producers of content, and this fact contributes to the democratization of knowledge.

According to Kaplan & Haenlein (2010), there are six different types of social media: collaborative projects, (micro) blogs, content communities, social networking sites, virtual game worlds and virtual social worlds. Table 2 presents their classification according to the two dimensions. The dimension social presence/media richness stems from media research. Social presence refers to the intimacy and immediacy of a medium, where higher social presence implies a larger influence that communication partners have on each other's behavior, while media richness means the amount of information transmitted in a given time period (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010, p. 61). The second dimension is that consisting of the social processes of self-presentation and self-disclosure. Self-presentation refers to people's desire to present themselves and control other's impressions of them, while self-disclosure is “the conscious or unconscious revelation of personal information” (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010, p. 62).

Table 2. Classification of Social Media by social presence/media richness and self-presentation /self-disclosure

		Social presence / Media richness		
		Low	Medium	High
Self-presentation / Self-disclosure	High	Blogs	Social networking sites (e.g., Facebook)	Virtual social worlds (e.g., Second Life)
	Low	Collaborative projects (e.g., Wikipedia)	Content communities (e.g., YouTube)	Virtual game worlds (e.g., World of Warcraft)

(Kaplan, Haenlein, 2010, p. 62)

Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy & Silvestre (2011, 241-251) believe that in the middle of social media is the complexity of the digital identity of the users, which is more or less revealed by each user. The central identity block is consolidated by the six peripheral blocks which this way also emphasise the functions exercised by the users: 1) *presence* - the extent to which the users can find out whether there are also other available/present users online; 2) *sharing* –the way through which the users exchange, receive/generate and share content; 3) *relationships* – the extent to which the users refer to each other; 4) *reputation* – the extent to which the users are familiar with the social status of other users and with the content these other users generate; 5) *groups*- the users adhere to and the criteria/values according to which these groups or online communities are constituted; 6) *conversation* or the extent to which the users communicate to each other.

2. Romanian political communication on Facebook – a very short presentation

With the advent of Facebook the political actor may present himself not only as a competent, unique character that is, more or less, similar to and/or distinct from his future voters, but especially as the *center of a world*. The social network Facebook consists of nodes that are, in fact, its

members. For the political actor, it is vital that he should be a central node, a node with as many connections and as many friends as possible. The larger is the number of connections in the virtual environment, the higher his social status and social importance (Dalsgaard, 2008, p. 11). The political actor, the *great man*, has to display his social capital in the virtual space and insist on presenting the size of the social network that he can turn to for “help”. The large number of friends-supporters may be interpreted as a sign of people’s support and sympathy, and the electoral race may be won through the quantitative dimension of Facebook also. Between the 2nd and 16th of November, Victor Ponta had 718 199 fans, and Iohannis 874,844, in the case of both candidates the fans being mainly from Romania and from the countries in which there are Romanian communities (Pătruț, 2015, p.130).

Facebook fragmented the virtual space and the Romanian candidates isolating themselves according to ideology, thus the online channel operated less as a platform for debate, but more as a political PR tool (Momoc, 2013, pp. 440-442). Even if some Romanian politicians entered the virtual game, they interacted less with their online friends. In 2012, local and parliamentary elections took place in Romania. In both campaigns, the candidates used social media to launch self-promoting messages and attacking topics, to rally supporters to vote and to avoid uncomfortable debates in the election campaign (Pătruț & Pătruț, 2013, pp.429-430; Pătruț, 2013, pp.285-287).

The parties and their political actors, in their chase for victory and for preserving the power, use Facebook as an effective advertiser or as a discursive battlefield for users who are paid by the party to post. In this emotional environment sometimes the citizens or communities of citizens who are indignant by the abuses committed by the political power intervene as well. In the virtual society, the emotion is quickly spread at national or global level and, as Dâncu (2015, p.309) appreciates, it is created an aching emotional community, shifting from a democracy of opinion to a democracy of emotion. The Romanian electors went to vote more out of the indignation against the poor organization of the elections in Diaspora in 2014.

3. Using Facebook in local election campaign (Bacău, 2016)

3.1. From a difficult debut (Bacău, 2012) ...

Its first timid uses took place during the electoral campaign for the 2008 Romanian parliamentary elections (Pătruț, 2011; Pătruț, 2012) and for the 2009 & 2014 presidential elections (Aparaschivei, 2011; Bosoteanu, 2012; Holotescu et al., 2011, Pătruț, 2014). In the local elections of Bacău, the first election showdown on Facebook took place in 2012 from 11 May until 7 June. Although a number of 10 candidates signed up for that electoral competition, only 3 of them were actually present on Facebook (C1-Romeo Stavarache from the National Liberal Party, C2-Cristian Manolache from the Ecologist Party of Romania, and C3- the independent candidate Dumitru Sechelariu) and were included in the study made then (Pătruț M, Pătruț B, 2013, pp. 420- 430).

During the election campaign of 2012, the candidate most active on Facebook was C3 with 63 posts, followed by C1 with 12 posts, and C2 with 10 posts. Candidate C3 posted 4 photos taken during the elections campaign and an advertising material, 16 links to his personal site and 38 to YouTube, to the recordings of all the election debates and shows that he had taken part in. C3 also posted 2 announcements about his future media appearances and 2 links to the newspaper hosting his spoken speeches. The other two candidates posted on Facebook campaign photos and an advertising material each, links to their personal sites or future media appearances, sent greetings to friends on the 1st of June, Child’s Day.

The three candidates running for mayor of Bacău used their Facebook accounts, firstly, as vehicles that allowed them to (self)promote themselves by means of acclamations (C1- 92 %, C2- 72%, C3- 81%),secondly, to attack their counter-candidates (C1- 3%, C2- 23%, C3- 19%) and thirdly, to defend themselves (C1- 5%, C2- 5%). As expected, posts dealt mostly with politics (80% - the average of the three candidates) and less with character. For chapter character, what mattered

more were the candidates' leadership skills and personal qualities. Personal skills were highlighted to a very small degree (C1- 2%, C2- 4%, C3- 5%).

A large number of materials were posted on the Facebook pages during (pre)elections and an extremely small number once the campaign was over (C1- 2 materials, C2 and C3, 1 material each). Practically, our candidates are interested in direct communication with the voters in the virtual environment especially during the elections campaign, this practice becoming less attractive once the campaign is over (Pătruț M, Pătruț B, 2013, pp. 430- 433).

3.2. ... to the easiest communication channel chosen by the candidates (Bacău, 2016)

3.2.1. The political-virtual context

The election campaign for the mayoralty of the city of Bacau unfolded between 6 May 2016 – 4 June 2016. The candidates who signed up for winning the mayor's seat were the following: Cosmin Necula- the Social Democratic Party (noted with C1 in our paper), Romeo Stavarache – independent candidate (the current mayor, noted with C2 in our paper), Dragos Luchian – the National Liberal Party (C3), Cristinel Manolache – The Romanian Social Party (**PSRo**) (C4), Dragos Daniel Stefan – The Alliance of Liberals and Democrats ALDE (C5), Claudiu Dorneanu – M10 (C6), Emil Melinte –independent candidate (C7), Cristian Ghingheș –independent candidate, Constantin Scripat – People's Movement Party. The last two candidates, although active in the virtual environment using their personal Facebook accounts, were not included in our study, because we did not have statistical data on their activity on Facebook during the election campaign.

In the city of Bacau 57.583 electors voted yesterday, the turnout was of 34,69%. The County Election Bureau of Bacau announced the following results obtained by the candidates: Cosmin Necula -35,38% of the number of votes, Cristinel Manolache (PSRO): 16,44%, Dragos Luchian (PNL): 16,16%, Romeo Stavarache (independent candidate): 10,51%, Cristian Ghingheș (independent candidate): 7,31%, Constantin Scripat (PMP): 5,25%, Dragos Stefan (ALDE): 4,07%, Emil Melinte (independent candidate): 2,82% and Claudiu Dorneanu (M10): 2,06%.

Facebrands.ro, the service which monitors the activity of the Facebook pages in Romania, offers the following data on the users from Bacau that had a Facebook account in the year of the local elections: 120.040 (52,59% women, 47,1% men), 1,30% of the total Romanian users. According to the age indicator, the data is extremely interesting for the candidates in Bacau: only 10,43% of the users are under 18 years old, while the rest of 89,57% of the users are adults, citizens with the legal right to vote.

3.2.2. How can Facebook help you become mayor?

Starting from the literature existent in the area of online political communication (Gibson & Ward, 2000; Foot & Schneider, 2006; Lilleker et al., 2011), a candidate is advised by his election campaign advisors to unfold an activity that should be as intense as possible in the virtual environment. The candidate informs his electorate about the governing program or campaign activity especially through social media, being permanently connected to the network of his supporters, whom he can mobilize to participate to the campaign and to generate favourable content.

In our study dedicated to the activities unfolded on Facebook by the candidates for the mayoralty of Bacau we will try to offer answers to the following research questions:

RQ 1- Was Facebook used by the candidates in order to increase their number of virtual supporters/fans – possible electors?

RQ 2- Was Facebook used as tool of interactive communication with fans or internet users?

RQ 3- What kind of materials do candidates post on Facebook during the election campaign?

After creating the public Facebook profile, the political actor involved in the election campaign aims to build the portrait of a leader, creating authentic and transparent content and offering his connected fans valuable and interesting information about his political experience and future political projects. The number of people who like the candidate's page represents a key-indicator which shows the health/vitality of the political actor's Facebook page. Fan reach corresponds to the number of fans of page who have seen any given post (Ernault, 2013).

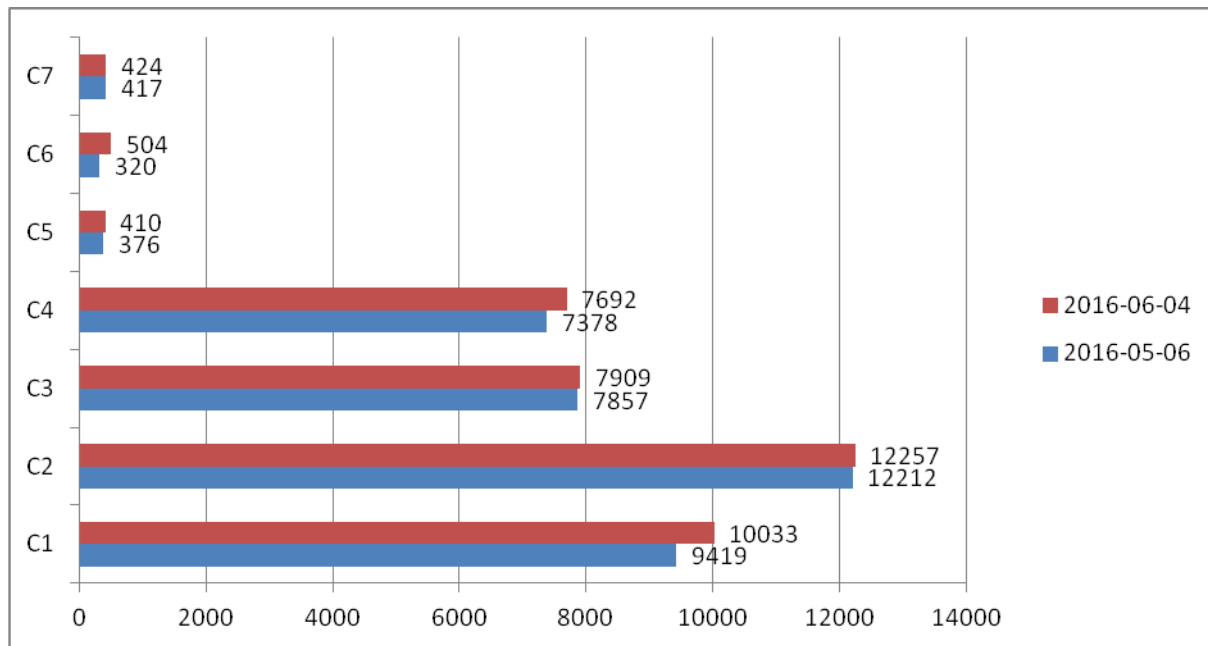


Figure 1. The number of virtual fans of the candidates' pages at the beginning and at the ending of the election campaign

By offering an answer to the first research question, we notice that all the seven candidates enrolled in the election race managed, in different proportions, to increase their number of Facebook page fans. The greatest performance is registered by C1, who manages to gain 614 fans during the campaign, followed by C4 with 314 fans, and by C6 with 184 more fans than he had at the beginning of the campaign. The increases registered by the other candidates were modest, almost insignificant.

Interactivity is specific to the web 2.0 era and it is the key to an authentic symmetrical and bilateral communication between the current political actor and his fans. On Facebook we can measure interactivity in two ways: from user to user and from user to document (Tedesco 2007, p.1187). While the first form of interactivity involves sharing different posts from a member of the social network to another, the second one involves liking and commenting on posts/ documents available on the social network. Both types of interactivity manage to show the implication/ engagement of the virtual friends in the process of communication with the political actor.

The interactivity or the engagement rate offers a clearer and more realistic image on the political actor's presence on Facebook. Engagement is "the number of people who clicked anywhere in your post. This includes liking, commenting and sharing and people who've viewed your video or clicked on your links and photos. And it also includes people who've clicked on a commenter's name, liked a comment, clicked on your page name and even gave negative feedback by reporting your post" (Ernault, 2013). The number of the engaged users is the number of the unique users who interacted with the analysed page within a certain amount of time. It is a clearer indicator than the number of fans, because the number of fans does not guarantee the exposure to the messages on the page, while these engaged users are users who really did interact with the page, on one hand being engaged in the activity they interacted with, on the other hand generating more exposure to the messages they interacted with among the fans.

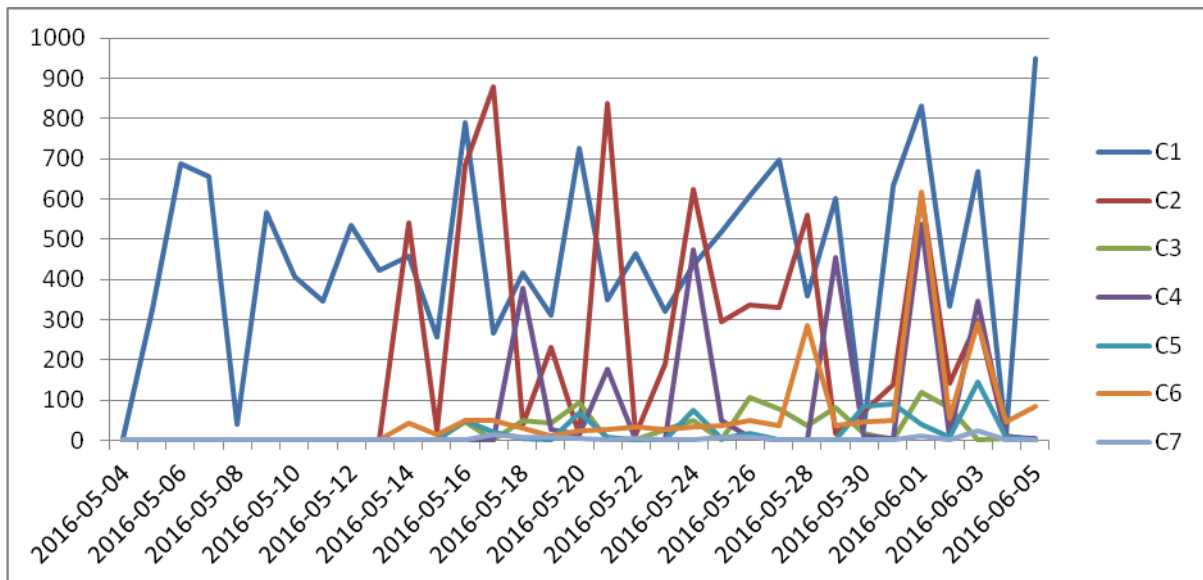


Figure 2. The engagement of the candidates' fans during the election campaign (Bacău, 2016)

The rate of engagement of the fans in social media during the campaign shows the political actor's ability of daily getting the attention of the fans, his ability of sending as many posts as possible to as many fans as possible, and of thus increasing his own visibility on the network (Smitha, 2013, p.6). The answer to the second research question is visible in figure 2. This shows how many fans were daily engaged by the active candidates on Facebook. By far the most engaged fans were those who supported C1, being constantly present during the whole campaign, and reaching their potential a day before the elections (with a maximum of 950 who liked, commented, shared and clicked on a post on 05.06.2016). At a lower scale, this was also sporadically achieved by C2 (with a maximum of 838 people who liked, commented, shared and commented on a post on 21.05.2016), by C4 (455 in 24.05.2016) and constantly by C6 (with a maximum of 619 on 01.06.2016). We can discuss about the interactivity of the Facebook page also by starting from the number of interactions which the political actor's fans had with his page during the election campaign.

Tabel.3 The users' interactions with the pages of the candidates during the election campaign

	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6	C7
1 interaction	1784	2179	206	985	219	1255	35
2 interactions	551	528	80	310	53	69	8
3 to 4 interactions	472	372	43	221	51	29	8
5 to 7 interactions	284	183	32	50	22	28	1
8 to 10 interactions	142	68	17	2	7	19	0
11+ interactions	435	84	10	0	2	30	1

The data kindly offered by Facebrand.ro, as it can be seen in table 3, show that one particular interaction with the page of the candidate was the most frequent in the case of all seven candidates. Also, the bigger the number of interactions is, the lower the number of users who interacted with the page. The candidates' results were different here as well, C1 managing by far to determine his fans to interact with his page and to involve them in its development process. Throughout the whole campaign, C1 had 3889 engaged fans, C2 had 3415 engaged fans, C4- 1569, C6 -1431, C3- 389, C5- 355 and C7-54 engaged fans. By searching for the answer to the third research question, we notice that the most frequently posted type of materials were photographs and videos.

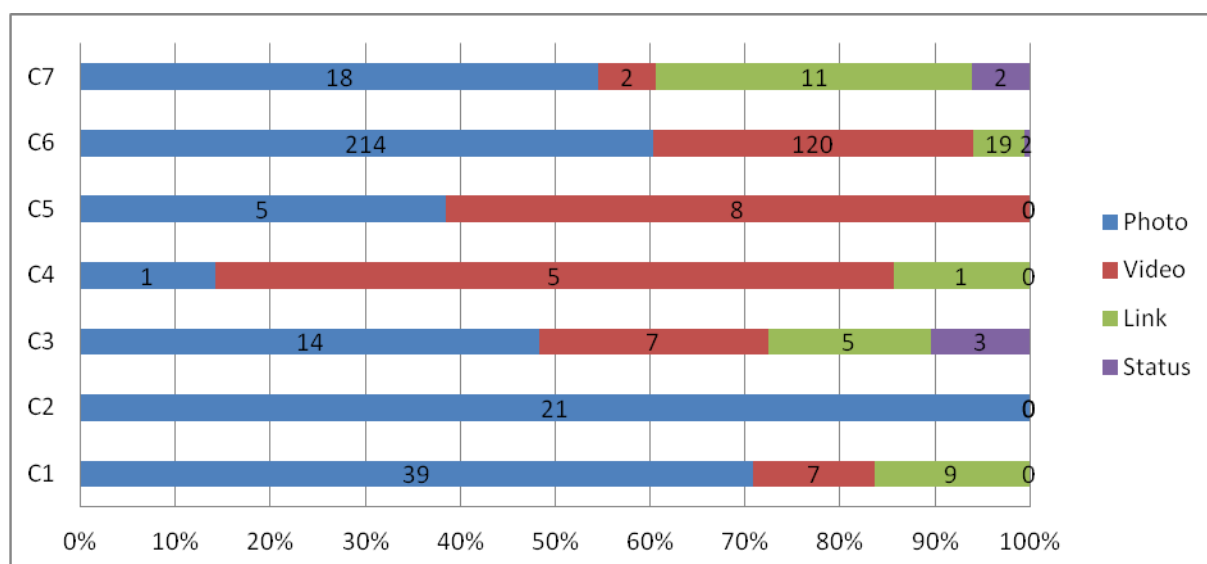


Figure 3. The type of the materials posted on Facebook by the candidates

The candidate C2 transformed his page into a photo album, probably considering that he can convince his virtual visitors to vote him without using words, only with the help of photographs illustrating the transformation of the city during his previous 2 mandates. Following the same principle, candidate C4 preponderantly resorted to videos of his dialogues with the electors. All the candidates used links to show visitors their appearances in the mass-media or their own posts on YouTube.

4. Conclusions

The local election campaign of 2016 came with something new: the candidates for the mayoralty of Bacau communicated on Facebook. The television lost supremacy not only at a national level, but also locally: some candidates communicated with their electors exclusively on Facebook, choosing to appear on television very rarely or not at all. In 2012 only 3 of the 10 candidates communicated on Facebook, and their communication was occasional and mainly unilateral. In 2016 things changed a lot: to be present on Facebook is a compulsory and easy to satisfy condition during a month-long campaign. The citizens are also more present on the network and they are no longer reluctant to ask the candidates questions or to make them propositions for the future development of the city. Practically, the most accessed posts of all the candidates are those which include their political program.

Can Facebook help you become mayor? If we try to explain the victory of the candidate C1 and to analyse to what extent he was helped by Facebook to win the elections, the answer could sound like this: if you are already locally famous (1), you started the online communication with the citizens of the city a year before the elections (2), you managed to daily provide your visitors with answers, you engaged them in your virtual campaign (3), and you did all these things not only online, but also offline (4), then the answer is for sure yes (also see the figure in the annexe).

Interesting were also the Facebook campaigns of other candidates (C3, C4, C6), but some of them entered the election race very late and did not count on a solid amount of fame, or were rather vulnerable regarding their public image and did not manage to improve their situation only by using Facebook, because they did not have enough personal meetings with their electors.

In 2014, the recently chosen president of Romania wins the elections with the help of social media, and the political analysts name him „the Facebook president” (Patrut, 2015, 133). Shifting to the local area, two years after the presidential elections we remark the important contribution of this network in choosing the mayor of Bacau by informing and engaging the online electors throughout the entire election campaign.

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Annex

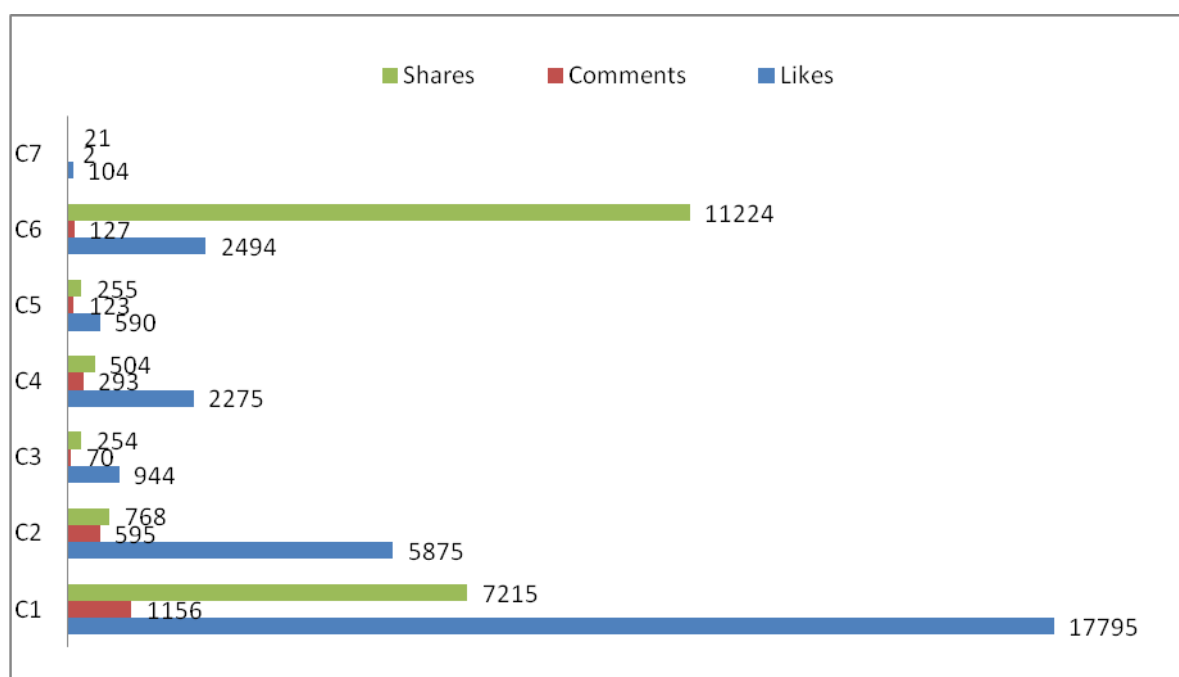


Figure 4. The local election campaign expressed in Likes, Comments, and Shares.