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INTERACTION AND CONFLICT IN 2009 ROMANIAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS. WATCHING THE DEBATES

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Abstract

It has been argued that the electoral debates, created as another opportunity for assuring accurate and complete information to the voters and equal rights of expression and presentation of the platform to the candidates, are seen today as a mere directed spectacles. On the other hand the televisual studies have pointed out the fact that, beside the formal character of this type of confrontations, they have the merit of bringing together opposed candidates, incite discussions about political platforms and solutions between candidates and, more important, afterwards have different types of echoes into society.

A fundamental point in starting this research is the premise that mass-media in general and televised debates in particular have an important role in reconfiguring public space because they provoke a sort of dialogue between actors, between citizens and between citizens and different actors. Also, the analysis of the televised debates becomes extremely important for understanding the electoral climate, but also for investigating the more complex transformations in political communication under the pressure of commercialization, commodification and tabloidization of mass-media.

Keywords: *electoral debates, political communication, 2009 Romanian presidential campaign, television*

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper addresses the phenomenon of televised debates both as rituals happening in every campaign and as specific manifestations that relate to certain political and historical contexts.

Starting from the idea that electoral confrontations are in fact “mirrors” for the manner in which debates and arguments are carried in the public sphere, the purpose of the paper is to investigate the approaches the moderator and the political actors took in the confrontation and the frame imposed by the televisual resorts that transmitted the debate. I aim to investigate how much of the confrontation was devoted to presenting

governing programs and solutions and how much was a reverberation of the conflicting atmosphere that characterized the entire campaign. In my analysis I focus both on the mediation realized by the television channel and on the content and development of the debates. The electoral debates, in my opinion, are staged spectacles that ensure visibility to the candidates and involve a double dimension of control. On the one hand the *setting* has control over the candidates, by imposing its context and rules to the candidates, and, on the other hand, the candidates control the *setting* by bringing their own deviations and diversions from the agreed themes and conducts.

2. POLITICAL COMMUNICATION AND TELEVISION

It has been argued that television changed the character of political communication more than any other mass-media channel. Through its combination of image and sound, television provoked an intensification of political communication and transformed it in something less controllable by the political actor.

Permitting a huge visibility for the political actor, the television produced a need for an increasing professionalization of political communication. As a result, there appeared a need for professionals of political communication, the so-called “spin-doctors”, with the mission to “sell” the politician, to make him appear in a positive light, to make his imperfections appear as simply human and unimportant mistakes and to amplify his quality and education. The politician became the subject of a new kind of visibility [1,2,3] provoked by the fact that the information environment became “more intensive, more extensive and less controllable than it was in the past” [4]. As a result the political actor is more often the victim of different types of scandals (sexual and financial scandals, so-called “declaration scandals” or gaffes) [5] and the role of the “spin-doctors” is to prevent or solve this type of situations.

Discussions about the character of political journalism agree upon the fact that it changed in the past decades, mass-media – especially television – using more and more narrations and interpretations when talking politics. It has been said that “the media alter the message” and that political communication “is largely *mediated* communication, transmitted through the print and electronic media” [6]. A menace has been identified in this strong mediation because, by inducing phenomena like extreme commercialization through scandal and tabloid approaches to diverse subjects, mass-media encourage a so-called “spiral of cynicism” [7], which could be characterized as the negative tackling of all situations both by the mass-media and by the political actors. The political situations are increasingly presented in terms of conflict, and the political confrontations look more and more like small battles in a

generalized war. These methods in political journalism “invite the attribution of cynical motives to political actors in campaigns and public policy debates”. [8] The result is a weaknesses chain, in which “reporters and politicians justify their own cynical discourse by saying that it is required by the other”. [9] A similar approach is conveyed by the theory of “video-malaise” [10], term that would designate the Americanization and commercialization of television. According to this interpretative model mass-media focuses on negative news and mediatizes excessively the back-stage games, which results in a negative perception of politics and political actors at the level of the public with consequences in political participation (namely absenteeism and stand-off of the citizens).

The discussion about this phenomenon is not unidirectional and there are voices to sustain that the commercialization of political journalism is not necessarily a bad thing, the most important being the fact that television shows attract spectators and develop a sort of civic competences among citizens. Pippa Norris asserts that “the news media have become diversified over the years, in terms of channels, availability, levels, and even the definition of news. This means that today information about public affairs (broadly defined) is reaching audiences over a wider range of societal levels and with more disparate interests. (...) A citizenry that is better informed and more highly educated, with higher cognitive skills and more sources of information, may well become increasingly critical of governing institutions. (...) But increasing criticism from citizens does not necessarily reduce civic engagement; indeed, it can have the contrary effect”. [11] In other words, no matter the approach of political journalism and mass-media in general, the debate, the diversification of information sources and the free exchange of ideas and opinions are seen as fundamentals of democracy.

3. THE CONTEXT OF 2009 DEBATES

The 2009 presidential elections from Romania were preceded by an electoral campaign with a strongly conflicting character which generated numerous controversies



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regarding the utilized practices. On the whole, the discussions about political programs were quasi-inexistent while huge spaces were conferred to the conflict and misunderstandings which often degenerated in ad-hominem attacks between candidates. Another characteristic of the 2009 presidential campaign is related to the role assumed by the mass media, which in most cases seemed to ignore the necessity of impartiality while presenting the political actors and events.

The electoral campaign was violent and aggressive and was dominated by corruption accusations that the adversaries caught in the competition brought one another. The candidate Traian Băsescu (the president in function at the moment) introduced the theme of the so-called "moguls" in the equation, theme quickly assumed by other candidates (Crin Antonescu). Another characteristic of the campaign consisted in distracting attention from real governing programs and an excessive focalization on false problems or solutions, for example the referendum for unicameral parliament and the reduction of parliamentarians from 471 to 300 and the so-called solution "Johannis", the well-known mayor of Sibiu, which was Antonescu's proposal for prime-minister.

The conflicting atmosphere reached its climax between the two tours of the presidential elections, while in the electoral race remained only Traian Băsescu and Mircea Geoană, with the scandal provoked by the presentation on Realitatea TV (by Dinu Patriciu, one of the media "moguls" identified by Traian Băsescu) of a short film in which the candidate Traian Băsescu seems to hit a child during the electoral campaign from 2004 and with the disclosures made by Traian Băsescu during the last debate regarding Mircea Geoană's visit at Sorin Ovidiu Vântu, the owner of Realitatea-

Caţavencu Group (also one of the media "moguls" identified by Traian Băsescu).

4. METHODOLOGY

The method utilized in this paper is an adaptation to televisual *setting* (*dispositif* in original, in French) analysis as formulated by P. Charaudeau and R. Ghiglione. This method addresses televised debate as "a change of words in front of the public". The public is seen in this *televisual setting* as "present-absent because of the interposed camera, which creates a second space that we will call *demonstration space*". The televised debate is seen as having two fundamental components: a verbal staging and a visual staging.

My analysis focuses on the verbal staging of the discourse and on some elements of visual staging considered essential for understanding the character of the debates. The purpose of this research is to investigate the conflicting character of the debate, to examine if the conflicting atmosphere that characterized the entire electoral campaign provoked reverberation at the level of the debates and to discuss the rapport between information and entertainment present in these debates.

The corpus of this study is composed by the three debates that took place before the two tours of 2009 presidential elections. The first debate took place on November 14, 2009 at Cluj between Crin Antonescu and Traian Băsescu (Mircea Geoană refused to participate) and was moderated by the journalist Mihnea Măruță. The second one took place on November 20, 2009, a few days before the first tour of the elections, at the Palace of Parliament, and had as protagonists the three candidates with most chances in winning the elections (according to the polls) and was moderated by the journalist Robert Turcescu.

The third debate took place on December 3, 2009, before the second round of elections, between the two winners of the first tour, Traian Băsescu and Mircea Geoană at the Palace of Parliament and was also moderated by Robert Turcescu. I've used in my research the transmissions of Realitatea TV and Antena3 (for reasons of audiences – see www.paginamedia.ro – and availability of resources).

5. INTERACTION AND CONFLICT IN 2009 ELECTORAL DEBATES - Findings -

Each of the analyzed debates consisted in more sequences meant to bring into discussion aspects regarding the political programs, but also sequences intended to stimulate conflict and spectacle.

The debate in Cluj included as topics the de-politicization of the state structures, the state's reform, education, fiscal relaxation and agriculture, with an underlined focus on the topic education, which was supplemented by the moderator with two questions: one regarding the concrete case of a high school principal affected by the law of unique remuneration and one concerning the young Romanians exodus.

The next two debates, organized by the Public Policies Institute, proved to be more structured and followed a precise program with the rules more clearly announced by the moderator from the beginning of the debate.

The debate in November 20 involved six episodes. The first of them consisted in five minutes speeches of every candidate on the question: *Why I want to become president of Romania?* The second round contained confrontations one to one, while the third round, the longest from all, lasted more than an hour and consisted in a debate between the three candidates regarding nine subjects agreed by the organizers and the campaign staffs. The nine themes were: foreign policy, ethical crisis of the Romanian society, presidential model, the reform of the state, education, economic crisis, agriculture, health system, future government. The next two sequences contained questions from the journalists: first, a question extracted by casting lots for each candidate and the second

the same question (of the moderator) for all candidates. At the end of the confrontation the candidates were given two minutes for convincing the electorate to vote for them.

The debate in December 3, organized after a similar pattern, consisted in 10 rounds. After the opening discourses of the candidates, each was asked to explain why he wouldn't vote for his counter-candidate. The third round involved a 15 minutes dialogue between the candidates regarding the relation between president and government and between president and parliament. The fourth and the sixth sequences consisted in a dialogue on the ten themes agreed by the organizers and the campaign staffs: foreign policy, national security, economy, finances and economic crisis, business environment, justice, constitutional reform, social protection, education and young people, health, rural development and agriculture. The fifth round consisted in two free questions of every candidate to his counter-candidate. The seventh episode included the journalists' questions. In the eighth round each of the two candidates was invited to give a gift to his political opponent. The ninth round consisted in the moderator's question for each of the candidates. Finally, the tenth round included the closing speeches of the candidates.

From the three analyzed debates, the one that was less intended (by the organizers) to create a media show seems to be the first debate. In this debate the conflicting charge was produced by the two candidates, who brought into discussion the controverted topics of the campaign and the image problems of the counter-candidates: connections with "moguls" and groups of interests, inactivity or lack of fulfilling one's duty and attitude towards women (as political actors or journalists).

In fact candidates acted during all debates like strategists and assumed as purpose to win as many little discursive "victories" as possible in the competitions. It can be said that the interactive part of the debate consisted mainly in attacks and counter-attacks between the candidates. The conflicting atmosphere was produced and amplified by the grave accusations of corruption and affiliation to different groups of interests, party jumping, incompetence and weakness, conflicting character



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(as a source for *tension* and *scandal*), inactivity or authoritarianism that the candidates brought to their opponents and to their opponents' sustainers. Besides direct and explicit accusations introduced in all sequences of the debates, the competitors used soft allusions and insinuations, but also ironies and sarcastic remarks. Only a few examples from November 20 Debate (my translation): *too “great” diplomat* (TB about MG), *I only wanted to assure you that these people really live well!* (CA about members of TB group of sustainers), *But they (the words) were so few and so rich, I would have remembered, I wouldn't have read them!* (CA about MG reading the citation from John Golden-Mouthed, brought to him by Victor Ponta in the time of the debate), *Say all the numbers that you know, Mister Geoană!* (CA towards MG).

It must be pointed out that in all debates the candidates introduced into discussion – as a high controverted topic – the communist past as a manner of legitimizing their course of action, either by referring to the 2009 moment as the anniversary of 20 years from December 1989 Revolution, either by referring to the condemnation of communism (theme connected with candidate Traian Bănescu) or by mentioning connections with political actors perceived as belonging to the past.

The debates organized on November 20 and December 3 had a strong conflicting charge, because the approach introduced by the candidates during speeches and discussions on the agreed topics, but also because of the format of the debates. There can be identified episodes especially created to generate conflicting encounters between candidates. This is the signification of the second sequence in both debates.

Mister (name of the candidate), *before, but also during the electoral campaign, you or your supporters criticized repeatedly the way in which mister* (the name of the counter-candidate), *here present, or the party whose leader he is,* (name of the party), *considered or consider to develop their political activity or their administrative attributions. Express now and here the most important of*

these criticisms that you brought to mister (name of the counter-candidate) *and to* (name of the party). (November, 20 Debate, my translation)

We are at the moment in which every candidate is asked to answer a question, attention!, apparently simple: Mister (name of the candidate), *why wouldn't you vote for mister* (name of the counter-candidate) *to become president of Romania?* (Debate from December, 3, my translation)

Particularly these last two debates stood under the sign of spectacular and entertainment. While the debate in Cluj included only one episode regarding the “human” behind the politician (the round where the candidates were asked to name the last book read and the last movie seen), the two debates organized in Bucharest included more *exercise-demonstration* episodes, more *test* sequences meant to reveal information about the political candidates' characters. For example, the task of naming the most beautiful deeds of their lives.

Honored candidates, you are political figures, but, before being political figures, you are simply and solely human beings like all of us. You've done over the years good deeds. You have confronted situations in which you maybe acted less correctly or even wrong, sometimes seriously wrong. About the dark side of your biography you gave sometimes explanations, you were asked to give explanations or you will be asked to give explanations. Please, in the order settled by casting lots, tell us this evening which is the most beautiful deed you believe you have ever done. (November, 20 Debate, my translation)

In the same area of entertainment should also be placed the questions about ethical models in the Romanian society, the oath on the Bible, the episode of giving and receiving gifts from the counter-candidate. The moment of the oath can be perceived as particularly tensional because it was related to the situations that represented the peak of conflict during the campaign: the film with Traian Bănescu hitting the child and the connections between Mircea Geoană and the so-called “moguls”.

Additionally, the media resorts pointed out the conflicting potential of the events by using terms specific to war or sports vocabulary like *confrontation* (*The Big Confrontation* – Realitatea

TV, November 20; *The Big Confrontation Day* – Antena3, November 20), *duel (The Duel of the Candidates* – Realitatea TV, November 14), *combatants or rounds*.

Also, the television transmissions used mostly shoulder-shots and waist-shots when presenting the candidates, perspectives that give a personalization effect. In the conflicting moments the candidates were shown either in close-up shots (a perspective that produces an intimacy effect and permits to the audience to examine the facial expression of the speaker), either in semi-ensemble views that create the debate effect and shows how the disputing speakers interact.

6. CONCLUSIONS

In my opinion the conflicting charge of the debates was extremely high, partly because the candidates' attitudes towards opponents, competition and themes included in the debates, partly because of the format of the debates, especially of the sequences that permitted and encouraged the exchange of accusations between candidates.

The format of the debates and television transmissions imprinted the events the signification of confrontations similar to battles. Also, the themes brought into discussion by competitors regarded in general grave accusations like corruption and affiliation to different group of interests.

Concerning the character of the televisual *setting* of the debates, it can be noticed a certain phenomenon of commercialization of political communication. The candidates are increasingly becoming commercial resources, debates being perceived rather as extraordinary events with commercial potential than as informative resources.

Still it can't be denied the importance of such debates for the public. In spite of the conflicting atmosphere, the debates bring elements of political information and incite the dialogue on themes that matter for society. From this point of view the electoral debates remain essential exercises of interaction in the public sphere and provoke echoes at the level of public opinion.

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