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2009 GREEK NATIONAL ELECTIONS 2.0

or how Greek politicians learned to love the web and what they did to it when they found it



GREECE'S MOST RECENT NATIONAL ELECTIONS WERE THE PLATFORM FOR THE COUNTRY'S FIRST FULLY-FLEDGED ONLINE BATTLEGROUND AS WE WITNESSED WEB 2.0 BEING UTILISED AT ITS BEST (AND WORST) BY POLITICAL COMMUNICATORS

Once the then Prime Minister announced - unexpectedly to most - that National Elections were to take place in a month, political spinsters, advertising execs and PR consultants went into a frenzy of serial brainstorming and idea-pitching that was verging from the ridiculous to the divine. They were immediately absorbed into a nebula of grey, darkish or even fully black campaigning. The dominant old-school advertising & PR outfits relied - as ever - solely on TV, Radio, Press and Outdoor Advertising in order to disseminate and propagate. To what effect and impact though? As the jury is still out on this one, let's digress, dissect and digest a few key elements.

Greece's offline media such as TV, Radio & Press have long lost credibility towards sceptical electorates as their key journalists' political affiliations have become obvious to most offline media consumers. As the political time was elapsing and the associated rhetorical sand-storm settled in, journalists took, defended, switched and attacked sides. Some of them have adopted milder yet polarised rhetoric whereas most of them were clearly streamlining their journalistic identity with specific political agendas.

I should note that Press in Greece, being already highly partisan, during the pre-election period was generally disseminating messages that were solely satisfying hard-core party voters (of both parties) by making them feel better about their previously "backed-up horses". Radio, still struggling to maintain a lesser-partisan mantle, lost credibility in its attempts to sensationalise in order to grasp the attention of listeners, yet not their hearts and minds. Even TV's normally effective "talking heads" did not provide clarity, purpose, direction or even "political climate" and were merely reduced to noise-production with confusing messages and low-level political rhetoric that was at best incomprehensible. Finally, the current ruling party's decision to not partake in outdoor advertising effectively neutralised the power of this traditional pre-election visibility and messaging platform. So besides one or two offline pop culture icons heading comedic / satiric cum political commentary shows, the offline media complex has proved ineffective in terms of communicating clearly differentiating political statements as the country's mainstream parties were essentially articulating opposition to each other and just that.

The two main competing parties already knew - or at least "smelled" - the importance of the web and were mostly aware of the country's demographics shifting towards an increasingly web-browsing, blog content seeking and definitely social network participating populations. So, both got onto the online band-wagon early yet with a rather unstructured and often unfortunate approach. Online rhetoric monitoring and response mechanisms were existent - albeit at different levels ranging from the simple email response to a negative blog post to the creation of own blogs for "reputation protection". Online know-how was available to both parties, yet it was compartmentalised and possibly not fully utilised to the extent it could as each political candidate reserved his / her team for own electoral objectives. Strategic direction though, came at a much later stage.

In the initial phases, political party "affiliates" were virtually spamming blogs and social networks with quotes, positions, pre-election commitments and even direct calls to vote specific individuals. Political candidates revamped their web-sites and created Facebook pages, fan sites, twitter feeds, MySpace accounts thus creating an unprecedented ridiculously noisy online environment. One political candidate for example had a newsgroup, an RSS feed, an FB profile, an FB group, an FB Fan Page, a twitter account, a flickr feed, a YouTube channel, a web-TV channel, a LinkedIn profile, a MySpace page, a blog and possibly - I have not checked but am almost certain - a dedicated NASA satellite feed branded after his name. It seemed that politicians in Greece woke up in the midst of a digital labyrinth and were quickly building within it before even navigating within it.

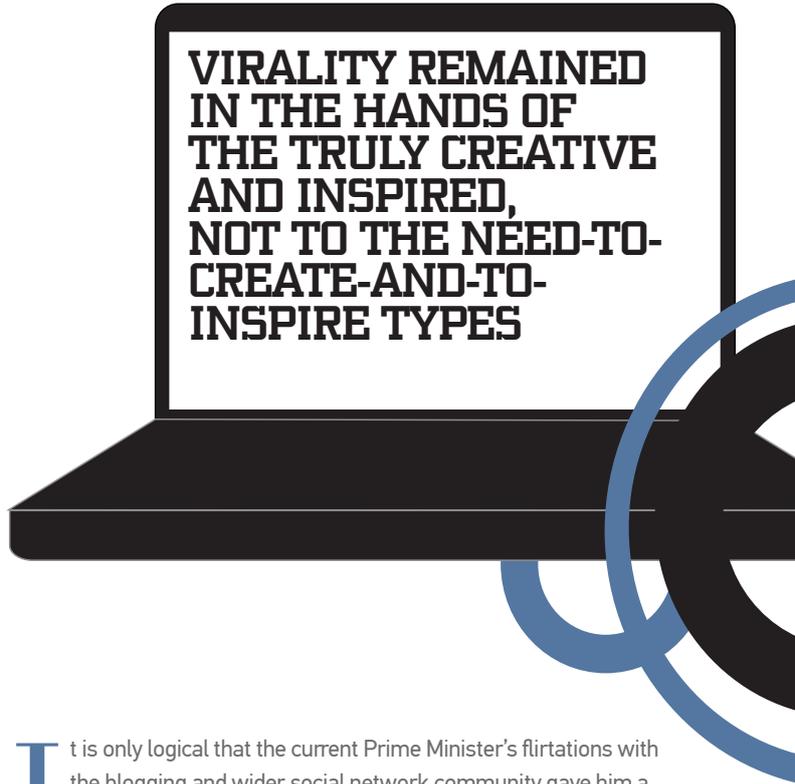
On the dark side of the online moon, black propaganda campaigns and character assassination attempts were abundant. Be it based out of pure-breed activist or partisan citizen journalism, we have witnessed a series of revelations, scandals and proof documents attached to specific political individuals. Even creativity sparked as we saw political candidates' posters being cleverly defaced to attach negative associations to their image and chain-mailed everywhere. Some time even intra-party political rivalries manifested as fully-fledged flaming wars online.

We also saw, full hacking / cracking / defacing of web-sites of political candidates. We witnessed 11th hour attempts to lift the anonymity of bloggers and online commentators where "defamation" was taking place. Finally, we even saw a total government ban of the online dissemination of any opinion poll results in the last days prior to the elections based on a controversial piece of legislation that was clearly not taking into consideration the proliferation of the Greek blogosphere.

Most political candidates were battling it out online by manoeuvring seemingly focused attacks on their opponents that were mere digital whispers and by running online communications campaigns that were

based on splashing their faces on banners and web ads. Again old-school advertising mentality has taken its toll and possibly contaminated the online space. Suffice to say, that there were even hate groups created online calling for non-voting of any candidate spamming their inbox, their mobile phone even their frequently visited web-pages.

The online communications game was won by the current ruling party's tech-savvy, laptop-carrying, constantly Internet-surfing leader who was pretty much simultaneously disseminating online and offline. He was online way before the pre-election period and online audiences knew that. The country's new Prime Minister was clearly declaring Greece's bloggers as the country's key idea creators and was tweeting away with his already strong fellow online travellers.



**VIRALITY REMAINED
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CREATE-AND-TO-
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It is only logical that the current Prime Minister's flirtations with the blogging and wider social network community gave him a strong popularity among the country's blogosphere. Clearly, the online population was aware that George Papandreou, the current PM of Greece, was an avid Internet user, a web 2.0 aficionado and ardent supporter of technological solutions that would realise his widely articulated yet hardly understood concept of "participatory democracy". Most bloggers celebrated his views on citizen journalism and electronic governance and they clearly gave him reputation "boosts" or "pillows" on several occasions. The rest of the blogs - that were fully partisan from before - rapidly lost credibility as they kept recycling offline content and were shelved along with the partisan press in the netherworlds of media obscurity.

You cannot enter the online rhetoric overnight and seek to manipulate it. You need to establish capabilities and relationships long before you may need them.



Having no space - in the always brilliant edition of Vitamin C - to provide a more comprehensive analysis of the online environment during the full course of the 30-day pre-election period, I have decided to conclude with some key facts, take-away could be:

CONTENT RECYCLING MAY BACKLASH:

The print press' content was massively recycled by the partisan bloggers in the initial stage thus diminishing their credibility as they managed to position themselves as mere "parrots".

VIRALITY IS CREATIVE OR SPONTANEOUS:

TV quotes and "incidents" were not popularised on YouTube and the blogosphere by individual political candidates' online task forces as they failed to become viral. Virality remained in the hands of the truly creative and inspired, not to the need-to-create-and-to-inspire types.

ONLINE CREDIBILITY IS FLUID:

Some partisan blogs - although considered authoritative prior to their propagandist tactics - lost credibility and were shelved into the partisan press category in the minds of the online-present electorate.

INFORMATION IS STILL KING:

Whereas the blogosphere was taking cues from TV and Press in the initial stages, as we progressed towards election time, TV and press were clearly taking cues from the blogosphere which seemed to have the most accurate and breaking news updated.

ONLINE BREEDS RECOGNISE THEIR TRUE OWN:

The man with the laptop is the current prime minister - the online population supported the one that was clearly actually closer to their breed. One should tread carefully when seeking endorsement from the online population. You cannot expect to enter the online rhetoric when you need it to be elected.

ONLINE RHETORIC CANNOT YET BE OWNED:

As Winston Churchill pointed out you may fool all people at some times, some people at all times, but never all the people at all times. You cannot enter the online rhetoric overnight and seek to manipulate it. You need to establish capabilities and relationships long before you may need them.

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