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Exploring Political Branding in the Hybrid Media System: The case of LREM candidates during the 2017 general elections in France

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Exploring Political Branding in the Hybrid Media System: The case of LREM candidates during the 2017 general elections in France

Political marketing is a major trend in politics, and election campaigns are no exception. This article analyzes the online political branding strategies of La République En Marche (LREM) candidates to the French legislative elections in 2017. News media has been quick to characterize these candidates as political outsiders determined to overturn traditional political codes. Considering this narrative towards their candidacy, this paper seeks to assess what influence this positioning has on their political branding behavior. Given the media hybrid system, we are particularly interested in their use of media news shared on their Facebook pages. How do they mobilize this content to build a personal brand? We show that LREM candidates are particularly inclined to relay content from the local press in order to make their personalities better known to voters. Our results point to an equalizing (or even catching-up) effect of this practice in the personal branding work between candidates.

9798 words

Keywords: Political branding; Personal brand; Facebook; Digital campaigning;

Personalization; Hybrid media system

Introduction

The image of political actors is becoming increasingly important nowadays, especially during election campaigns (Bast, 2021; Scammell, 2015). In a context where the personalization of political actors is increasingly important (Caprara, 2007), the personal identity and positioning of candidates, beyond their partisan affiliation, are also

increasingly important. For some authors (Marland, 2016; Lees-Marshment, 2021), candidates then become political brands, seeking to position themselves and make themselves known on the political market. This is referred to as political branding of political actors (Pich & Newmann, 2020; Needham & Smith, 2015).

Social media play a crucial role in the development of personal branding for political actors (Needham & Smith, 2015). Social media allow politicians to address their constituents directly. Even more so, it is now possible for political actors to select the information they wish to share online, bypassing the media filter. Nevertheless, social media coexist with so-called traditional mass media - thus forming, in the words of Chadwick (2017) a “hybrid media system”. Despite the popularity of social media, the news media remain important players in the political communication process, giving substance to public debates. Indeed, the two are in continuous interactions, the practices and the norms of the one hybridizing the practices and the norms of the other. The so-called traditional media continue to play an important role in shaping the image that politicians and political parties wish to present to the public. Political actors need to manage their relationship with the traditional media, through more or less direct criticism or, on the contrary, by maintaining cordial relations with the media, in order to attract their attention (Gerstlé & Nai, 2019). Even in the case of outsiders or populist politicians openly hostile to journalists, media coverage can be an important element of their electoral strategy and can be triggered using social media (Wells et al., 2020).

The purpose of this article is to study the construction of the branding of LREM candidates in the 2017 French legislative elections. LREM candidates running in 2017 were in a peculiar situation. On the one hand, they represent a new party on the French

political scene. En Marche (EM), renamed La République en Marche (LREM) and then Renaissance (from 2022), had a political brand to build beyond the personality of its founding leader, Emmanuel Macron. On the other hand, the party's candidates were presented as aiming to renew politics by helping to change its codes. They were therefore perceived as political outsiders, unknown to the general public. In this context, the strategy adopted by Emmanuel Macron and his party during the 2017 presidential campaign was instead to attract media attention through a 'positive campaign' (Gerstlé & Nai, 2019).

Our aim is then to analyze political branding online by candidates through the study of content from traditional news media that they choose to share on Facebook. To do so, the article answers this research question: Given their outsider position, how have they mobilized news media content to build their personal political brand? The choice to study the sharing by candidates on social media of content produced by traditional media is relevant in the context of a hybrid media system. This allows to understand how candidates choose to share media frames about themselves on social media, in order to construct and project a particular political brand. Moreover, it provides insight into how traditional media outlets can influence the candidates' own efforts in political branding. We begin with a review of the literature on political branding and the branding process, then we present our methodology. Our quantitative and qualitative results precede a reflection on branding in the digital age.

Political brand and branding

Political branding is a sub-discipline of political marketing. The concept has gained in importance in recent years to the point that the brand is now identified as an essential

communication tool in politics (Cosgrove, 2011; Scammell, 2015). This applies both during electoral periods and in a governance context. In a permanent campaign context, where politicians strive to garner voter support beyond election cycles, this holds even more significance (see Marland et al., 2018). However, if more and more studies focus on political branding, the literature is emerging, and several shortcomings and blind spots persist (Winther Nielsen, 2017).

Yet, there is no universal definition of the concept of political brand. As Marland (2018, p.139) notes, it is “impossible to construct a definitive description” because “brands are the sum of all communication exposure and touchpoints”. However, it is recognized that a political brand is the result of two components: a corporate brand and the brand image. The corporate brand is projected by a political organization or a candidate as a global political offer. This offer is the result of what Pich and Newman (2020) called “the political brand trinity”: the party brand, the party leader brand, and the policy brand. The brand image is what voters perceive the brand to be, the image they have of it. As Lees-Marshment (2014, p.104) notes, it is “the overarching feeling, impression, association or image the public has towards a politician, political organisation, or nation”. The meeting of these two dimensions thus form the political brand. It is positioning tool and a whole on which voters can base their perception of a political offer like a party, a candidate, or a programme (Marland, 2016; Pich & Newman, 2020).

Branding is part of the trend of shifting from program-centric politics to candidate-centric politics, from “substance to image” (Zavattaro, 2010, p.125; see also Scammell, 2015). Politicians have become commodities and need to distance themselves from their competition (Zavattaro, 2010). As Needham (2006, p.184) mentions: “Successful leaders

are those who are able to offer personalised brands, with simple, aspirational and consistent messages, built on a small number of symbolic policies rather than a broad legislative programme”. Thus, brand success is achieved when voters prefer one political offer to others, even if the latter may not necessarily be the one that best suits their needs (Marland & Nimijean, 2021).

One of the aspects that remains to be explored concerns the way in which political brands are communicated (Needham & Smith, 2015). Branding being a process of image and positioning management, it is relevant to analyze the strategies used to project the desired image of a candidate. As Falkowski and Jabłońska (2020) have shown, priming, framing and agenda setting strategies can be used by parties and their candidates to contribute to the management of their brand. Social media are an adequate communication channel to do so.

Studies on political branding have focused especially on national leaders and parties (Cosgrove, 2018, Lees-Marshment, 2021; Marland, 2016, 2018; Marland & Nimijean, 2021; Pich & Newman, 2020; Zavattaro, 2010). However, more and more writings focus on other political actors including local politicians and members of parliament (Cosgrove, 2014; Dubois et al., 2021), but little is known about the brand of local candidates. This article addresses this gap.

The case of 2017 France legislative elections as research object

France experienced a major political upheaval in 2017 by choosing for President a young man of 39 years old, Emmanuel Macron, who had never been elected before. The latter

had created the political movement En Marche! the previous year which enabled him to win the election. His ambition was then to renew French politics (Hanley, 2018; Kuhn, 2018) in a context of disenchantment with traditional parties (Cole, 2018; Mény, 2017). From the first round of the presidential election, and for the first time in the history of the 5th Republic, the two traditional government parties, the Socialist Party (center left) and Les Républicains (conservative) were also disqualified (Durovic, 2019). This movement of realignment (Gougou & Persico, 2017) and fragmentation (Clift & McDaniel, 2017; Dolez & Laurent, 2018; Evans & Ivaldi, 2017) of the political system also continued during the legislative elections, held in the aftermath of the presidential election. En Marche! (1), by winning 308 seats out of 577, took advantage of the wave of adhesion caused by the arrival of its founder as president a few weeks earlier (Evans & Ivaldi, 2017). The party, despite the very strong abstention (Cole, 2018; Evans & Ivaldi, 2017), has thus sent a new generation of politicians to Parliament (Rouban, 2017). This has contributed both to the upheaval of the party system, but above all to the significant renewal of the political class (Kuhn, 2017).

It is indeed new Members of the National Assembly (MNAs) who arrived at the Parliament. 28% of new MNAs had never been elected or even worked in the political field before (Boelaert *et al.*, 2018). This entry of novices in politics is largely explained by the process of selection of candidates by En Marche!. Having relatively few troops because of its novelty, the movement allowed them to arrive in a few weeks where their predecessors from traditional parties arrived after many years. The candidates were indeed appointed on the basis of an open call for candidates, by a committee of nine people for whom the variety of political backgrounds was one of the main selection criteria. Candidates of a new kind have therefore entered politics. The electoral context lent itself particularly to this massive arrival of new elected representatives, while the

recourse to the invocation of real life in front of political professionals was particularly intense during the campaign. Thus, the National Assembly has been rejuvenated and feminized (39% against 27% of women in 2012). But perhaps the most important element is that it has managed to attract new professional profiles, notably from the economic fractions of the upper classes. These socio-professional categories, which had deserted the benches of the Assembly, came back in force in 2017, a large part under the banner *En Marche!*. Unaccustomed to politics and its codes, leaving some of the much better-paid positions, a whole generation of politicians from the private sector arrived at the Parliament. Thus, the LREM group is dominated by former senior executives from the private sector and the self-employed (business leaders, lawyers, doctors) (Boelaert *et al.*, 2018).

The challenge was to build a political identity for these candidates in record time in a campaign that was particularly hostile to traditional politics. To do so, the LREM candidates could highlight their status of new entrants in politics influenced by the entrepreneurial culture and position themselves as heretics of traditional politics. This marketing positioning was necessary since most of the candidates recruited were not anchored in the local political landscape. There was a great risk of appearing as ‘off ground’ candidates. Then candidates had to emphasise their local anchorage during the campaign.

The case of the French legislative elections seems interesting to study in a context where research in political communication still focuses mainly on the United States (Boulianne, 2019). Much remaining to be done to analyse “less obvious” case (Enli & Moe, 2013). The French case is one of these, being poorly studied compared to Anglo-Saxon countries

(Greffet & Giasson, 2018). This article therefore contributes to the literature on political communication in French-speaking countries (*la Francophonie*).

There is a similar situation for non-national campaigns like those that take place in the constituencies. As Larsson and Skogerbø (2018) mentioned, the uses of social media by local politicians remain largely to be studied. Past studies on the use of social media by French politicians have mainly focused on national figures such as presidential candidates (Eyries & Poirier, 2013), the populist style of certain actors (Ernst *et al.*, 2017), as well as on the Twitter in particular (Écormier-Nocca & Louis-Sidois, 2019; Frame & Brachotte, 2015). To date, little has been written on the use of Facebook by candidates at the constituency level. This article also aims to fill this gap.

Method and Data

The objective of this article is to paint a portrait of online branding practices by studying behavior associated with the sharing of news media on Facebook pages by local candidates. Taking the 2017 French legislative election as a case study, and given the particular position of LREM candidates, we analyze how have they mobilized news media content to build their personal political brand in a hybrid media system.

More precisely, the article focuses on two particular research questions:

RQ1. What types of news media content do candidates post on Facebook?

RQ2. How this content fits into their branding strategy?

This article offers a quantitative content analysis. This method has two advantages. First, most studies on political branding (Marland & Wagner, 2020; Armannsdottir, *et al.*, 2019; Pich *et al.*, 2017) use interviews with actors (politicians, strategists, etc.). We therefore proceed by observing the content shared by the actors without interfering with them, so as not to depend on their *a posteriori* statements. This approach allows us to complete the results of the literature using an original and objective method. Moreover, the choice of Facebook is significant. Indeed, according to Enli and Skogerbo (2013), it is “the preferred social media platform for marketing purposes”. What's more, it's a platform that's particularly popular with the French. Of the 56.4 million French Internet users in 2018, 38 million (67%) are active monthly Facebook users, and 22 million (39%) are active daily on the platform (2).

Data collection and presentation

We collected all the posts published on the LREM candidates' Facebook pages who were elected to the French National Assembly during the 2017 legislative elections. Only publications posted between May 5, 2017 and June 9, 2017 were collected. This period corresponds to the official campaign period as provided by French law.

The data was collected in October 2018 using the Netvizz application (Rieder, 2013). This free online tool, which is no longer accessible due to Facebook's API changes following the Cambridge Analytica scandal, has been very popular within the scientific community in recent years (Rieder, 2018).

Collecting data on Facebook remains a challenge for social scientists, and techniques inevitably influence the results. As Villegas (2016) points out, data collection techniques are not equal: Automatic retrieval yields less posts than manual collection, but the latter is more likely to produce transcription mistakes that can lead to errors in analysis. More broadly, this raises the question of archiving digital communications in the electoral context and the possible democratic consequences of inaccessibility to its data. Unlike newspaper articles, which are for the most part kept in physical or digital archives, politician’s online communications are often not archived elsewhere than on the social media accounts or websites they control (3). They can therefore modify or delete it *a posteriori*. These sites may also be subject to bugs or content removal without warning.

From the 314 elected LREM candidates, we were able to retrieve the publications of 185 of them. We noticed that around 40 per cent of the pages used during the legislative campaign by LREM MNAs was no longer available at the time of data collection, having been removed or made inaccessible to the public. However, we consider our sample to be relevant since it consists of nearly 60 per cent of LREM elected candidates. Table 1 presents the characteristics of our sample compared to those of all elected members of the party during the French legislative elections in 2017.

Table 1. Representativeness of the corpus (%)

		In corpus	Off-Corpus	Total LREM MNAs
Gender	Male	49	58	53
	Female	51	42	47
Status	Outgoing MNA	8	11	9
	First-time-elected MNAs	91	88	90
	Former MNA	1	1	1
Age	Under 25	1	0	1
	26-35	23	13	19

	36-49	43	39	41
	50-65	30	42	35
	More than 65	3	6	4
Round of election	First	1	0	1
	Second	99	100	99
Social*	Twitter	98	96	97
	Blog	29	30	29
	Facebook Account	66	78	71
	Facebook Page	100	65	85
	Instagram	35	29	32
	Youtube	32	29	31
Quotes in Factiva**	0-25	57	43	51
	26-50	30	31	30
	51-75	6	16	10
	76-100	1	6	3
	More than 100	6	4	5

* Percentage of MNAs present on these media in July (one month after the election)

**Number of quotes of each MP in Factiva during the campaign (5th of may-9th of June 2017)

Men are slightly underrepresented in our corpus (49 per cent against 53 of the total population of future LREM MNAs). But this under-representation remains relatively low (4 points). The members of our corpus are also representative in terms of status (outgoing MNAs or first-time-elected MNAs). On the other hand, there is a slight over-representation of those 26-35 (23 per cent against 19) and a slight under-representation of those 50-65 (30 per cent against 35). Facebook account holders are also slightly underrepresented (66 per cent against 71). The over-representation of Facebook page holders is explained by the method of selection of our corpus (100 per cent against 85). Finally, the candidates with the fewest citations in the newspapers during the campaign are slightly over-represented in our corpus (57 per cent against 51), while candidates cited between 51 and 75 times are slightly underrepresented (6 per cent against 10). Overall, the differences in representations remain very slightly. That is why we can consider that our corpus, although it gathers only 60 per cent of the candidates, is representative of the totality of this population.

Thereby, our initial corpus consisted of 8 488 posts. Our main inclusion criterion for the final corpus was that the publication promoted “traditional” news media content such as newspaper articles or television appearances. This could take a variety of forms: sharing a link, publishing a picture of a newspaper page, promoting the candidate’s TV or radio interview, and so on. When we found this kind of element, the post was included in the final corpus for analysis. In the end, 872 publications meet this criterion. This means that just under 10% of the publications published on LREM candidates’ Facebook pages during the 2017 legislative elections included elements associated with “traditional” news media.

Coding of the data

Regarding content analysis, a grid was created based on the indicators relevant to our research question. It has two objectives: to identify the characteristics of the shared media content as well as the potential reasons for doing so. The elements of the grid are illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of the coding grid

Objective	Variable	Indicators
Media’s features	Media reach	Nationwide Regional or local Other
	Type of shared media content	TV Show Radio Show Newspaper Online Press More than one type
Branding behavior	Sharing time	Before Live After
	Frame	‘expert’ (issue-oriented) or individual (personalization)

The 'Media reach' and 'Type of shared media content' indicators are inspired by the study by Skogerbø and Karlsen (2014) when they seek to know how, in Norway, during election campaigns, 'non-celebrity politicians' gain visibility. They ask their interviewees who they think are the most important media for achieving this goal. Different categories are available: local newspapers, regional newspapers, local radios, regional TV, national newspapers, social media, national TV, national radios and personal websites. Using these categories, we were able to identify two first types of indicators: the type of shared media content (TV, radio, newspapers, etc.) and the media reach (local or national). With regard to the media reach, we considered that, given the structuration of the French media space, it was more logical not to differentiate, as the authors had done, between local and regional level.

These first two indicators are important in our case. They allow us to understand how the candidates build their online presentation selecting their traditional media presence. Do they mention national or local media? TV or press? Indeed, the meaning of each type of media is different and is connoted: Do they prefer to emphasize their national status or their local anchorage, etc.? Obviously, all candidates aren't present in national media or on the TV. Nevertheless, these first indicators allow us to collect various primary results.

The last 'sharing time' and 'frame' indicators were developed according to the context. Indeed, it first seemed to us interesting to control the moment of sharing online (before, during or after the media appearance) in the sense that the choice of this moment can be an indication of the goal sought by the politician by sharing: we can indeed think that when he publishes the announcement of a next visit to TV or radio, the politician, by

announcing his media presence, invites his supporters to listen or watch him during his performance. On the other hand, when he publishes his passage after, one might think that the publication is done more with the aim of simply letting the voters know that he has been invited on an emission. The relation he has with his supporters is then different, influencing his branding. In the first case, he is trying to increase his popularity immediately. In the second case, the work of collecting and presenting his various media appearances on Facebook reflects a desire to build a coherent image in the longer term by enabling the public to follow his media career over time. Sharing content afterwards also provides greater control over the message and, consequently, its utility in shaping the candidate's personal brand. This suggests that the candidate chooses to share such content with his followers because he perceives it as beneficial to his strategy.

The 'Frame' indicator (expertise or personalization) is for its part specific to the 2017 French legislative campaign context. As mentioned above, this campaign was strongly marked by a debate on the candidates' professional origins, as well as their seniority in politics. In these conditions, it is interesting to see to what extent candidates have shared media publications concerning their personal presentation (trajectory, support, etc. - category 'personalization') or, on the contrary, put forward their skills and expertise (especially in management or more specific subjects), - 'expert' category. Content that refers to a candidate's background or personality is classified in the 'personalization' category. Content that refers to specific thematic issues, program points or political issues is classified in the 'expert' category. The way they presented them could inform us on the image they want to project of themselves and possibly lead them to various branding trajectories.

All publications in the corpus were coded by a single coder, the main author of the article. A test phase was carried out by the two authors where all the differences in interpretation were discussed (rate of agreement: 96.5%).

Results

What content do they publish?

Our first research question is about the type of content published by candidates on their Facebook pages. Two indicators have been identified. First, we identified the type of news media to determine whether the content shared by the candidates on their Facebook pages was initially broadcast on television, radio, or published in a printed newspaper or on the Web. Secondly, the scope of the news media was identified to determine its importance in the media landscape. Table 3 presents the number of posts containing the different types of shared news media online.

Table 3. Number of shares by news media types

News Media type	Total number of posts*	Percentages	Average number of posts by candidate	Median
TV	235	26.9	1.3	0
Radio	130	14.9	0.7	0
Newspapers	403	46.2	2.2	1
Online	98	11.2	0.5	0

*6 posts could not be identified.

Newspaper articles are by far the most shared ‘older’ or ‘traditional media contents (403 posts), following by television appearances (235 posts), presences on the radio (130 posts), and, finally, mentions in a media only published online, such as blogs or local news website (98 posts). This is interesting because it shows very well the phenomenon of Chadwick's hybrid media system (2017) in which the ‘older’ media feed the ‘newer’ and vice versa. The reproduction or online distribution of content that has been made accessible in print or on the air inevitably favors its sharing on other platforms. That said,

it is also interesting to note that when the content is not available in digital format, or that candidates, for one reason or another, cannot find the digital copy, some of them have recourse to artisanal means to share it. Our analysis of the corpus thus revealed that, on the 133 occasions, the pages of the candidates shared content from newspapers using a photo of the article. This situation can be explained by the lack of an online version of the newspaper, or by the limited skills of the candidate or his team. This can also demonstrate a desire for authenticity through staged digital amateurism.

But the media types relayed could also depend on the characteristics of the candidates (see Table 4). We selected some control variables generally used by literature when analyzing online communication of politicians: age (Karlsen & Enjolras, 2016), sex (Evans & Clark, 2016; Wagner *et al.*, 2017), seniority in politics (measured here by the fact of being first-elected or not) (Jackson & Lilleker, 2011; Koc-Michalska *et al.*, 2014), and rurality (or not) of the constituency (Scherpereel *et al.*, 2017). We added to these variables two more variables in relation with our subject: MNAs presence in traditional media (Neihouser & Ouellet, 2022) (measured by the number of citations of their name in Factiva) and their activity on Facebook (measured by their number of publications on this social media).

Table 4. Regression: do media types relayed depend on the characteristics of the candidates?

	TV	Radio	Press	Online
Age	-0.0040636 (0.0152666)	2.569e-02 (1.631e-02)	3.056e-02. (1.799e-02)	0.033616. (0.017948)
Sex	0.3081979 (0.3151276)	-6.791e-01* (3.309e-01)	-3.652e-01 (3.757e-01)	0.306076 (0.357272)
First-time elected	0.5228816 (0.6093810)	-5.455e-02 (-6.525e-01)	3.226e-02 (6.354e-01)	0.639004 (0.858909)
Urban district	-0.2279605 (0.5267089)	3.070e-01 (5.616e-01)	-1.819e-02 (6.409e-01)	-0.409816 (0.554524)

Citations in Factiva	-0.0001022 (0.0003757)	4.541e-04 (3.602e-04)	-1.446e-05 (3.708e-04)	-0.000412 (0.000833)
Number of Facebook publications	0.0209840** (0.0069851)	1.569e-02* (6.992e-03)	4.166e-02*** (1.000e-02)	0.015566* (0.007384)

Signif. codes: 0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1

Characteristics of the candidates are less important than we could have thought. Actually, the number of Facebook publications by the candidate during the campaign is the only robust variable for each type of medias. In other words, outgoing MNAs or incumbents that are present in traditional media (those which have several citations in Factiva) don't share more traditional media content than others. This result is relatively surprising. It may be explained by the fact that those candidates are already legitimated by their status, so they would need less to share their media exposure on social media. From the other part, first-time elected MNAs need to legitimate themselves on Facebook by sharing news media content. Finally, their respective publications balance. This is important for us because it demonstrates that even if a candidate is less covered by the media, he can post media content. In other words, it disqualifies the accusation of tautological reasoning: one can relay media content even if he isn't cited in these media. Otherwise - and in a lesser extent -, being a woman seems to be a predictable variable of sharing radio content.

Regarding the reach of the news media that candidates promote on their Facebook pages, local news media are present in 65.7 percent (n = 573) of the publications analyzed, while the proportion is only 33.7 for nationals (n = 294). While candidates upload in average 3 posts concerning local news media content, they publish only 1.6 posts including national ones. It should be noted that the reach of 5 media shared in as many publications could not be identified.

This result is of relevant importance: the general election, online and from the candidates' point of view, seems to be more local than national. This result seems to go against the idea of centralization (and professionalization) of campaigns with online tools (Karlsen, 2011; Zittel, 2009). On the other hand, it's important to remember that in France, local media are far more inclined to offer specific candidate-related content than national media, which are more interested in the campaign from the point of view of a confrontation between parties (and not just between candidates). This over-representation could be an indirect consequence of the traditional media's framing of the campaign.

When we cross these results with the socio-demographic characteristics of the candidates, the data show that, as seen above, the most predictable variable concerning the type - local or national - of media posted is the number of Facebook publications during the campaign. Again, the status of the candidate doesn't have a huge importance - particularly concerning the sharing of national media. For those posts, the age is the only predictable variable (and not the number of citations in Factiva which could be seen as an indicator of the mediatic capital [Davis & Seymour, 2014] of the incumbent). Concerning the relay of local media, the only variable - except the number of publications Facebook -, is to be first-elected. This may significate they are one of those which are 'localizing' the campaign (Pattie & Jonhston, 2003; Neihouser, 2023). We can make the assumption that they prefer carry out campaign on local basis than on national basis (Denver, 2002). This allows them to share contents citing them. Furthermore, it allows them to claim a local anchor.

Table 5. Regression: Do content shares depend on the candidates' characteristics?

	Local	National
Age	-1.691e-02	3.757e-02*

	(1.879e-02)	(1.634e-02)
Sex	5.366e-02 (4.026e-01)	-3.544e-01 (3.243e-01)
First-time elected	1.325e+00* (6.666e-01)	-1.054e+00. (6.074e-01)
Urban district	-7.089e-01 (8.262e-01)	-7.930e-01 (5.556e-01)
Citations in Factiva	-3.788e-05 (4.020e-04)	1.858e-04 (4.039e-04)
Number of Facebook publications	4.271e-02 *** (1.090e-02)	2.637e-02*** (7.551e-03)

Signif. codes: 0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1

Table 5 presents content shares according to candidates' characteristics. When looking for sociodemographic variables likely to influence the quality of traditional media relays on Facebook (TV, Radio, Press or Online media; Local or national ones), our first main result is thus that sociodemographic issues don't seem to be really important in sharing media content for incumbents.

In this part, our research question was: 'What content do they publish?' Beyond the variables influencing the publication of different types of content, we have above all demonstrated that the most relayed media content was that from traditional newspapers, far ahead of that from TV and radio. In addition, local media represent 2/3 of the content relayed, against only 1/3 for national media.

How this content fits into their branding strategy?

To better understand the branding behaviors of candidates to share 'traditional' media content on their Facebook pages, two more indicators were retained. We note the time when the publication was shared online compared to the time when the event took place (the interview, the press conference, the announcement, etc.) (before, during or after the event). Second, we noted the frame of the content in the shared news media content. Does

the candidate share media contents to frame himself as an expert on a subject or an issue (environment, economy, etc.)? Conversely, does he try to promote his person and his qualities, with the aim of personalization?

Regarding when the content was shared on the candidate's Facebook page (see Table 6), the large majority is posted after the media event (84 per cent). This result is not surprisingly. In most of the cases, the candidates are posting content media after their diffusion. This is particularly the case for newspaper articles. This can be explained because these articles do not necessarily deal with a specific event. In this case, it is more difficult for the candidates to anticipate and promote the content before it is made available.

Table 6. When was the media content shared on the Facebook page

	Number of publications	Total percentage	Average number of publications by candidate	Median
Before media event	115	13	0.6	0
During media event	22	2.5	0.1	0
After media event	735	84	3	3

With regard to publications preceding a media event, these are announcements of television or radio appearance.

Figure 1. Publications of candidates preceding media event

Lénaïck ADAM
7 juin 2017 · 🌐

Branchez vous sur **Guyane 1ère** les amis. Et ne manquez pas le débat de ce soir sur **ATV Guyane**. #UnirPourLaGuyaneEnGrand #LA2017



41 likes · 12 partages

J'aime Commenter Partager

Bruno Bonnell est à Tonkin.
22 mai 2017 · 🌐

Reportage de M6 sur ma candidature à Villeurbanne pour les élections législatives. Échanges chaleureux au pied de mon premier appartement ! Rendez-vous à 12.45 pour visionner le reportage !



30 likes · 1 partage

J'aime Commenter Partager

Sources. <https://www.facebook.com/lenaickadamoff> and <https://www.facebook.com/Bruno.Bonnell>

Candidates (or their teams) can also post live.

Figure 2. Live publication of a candidate

Delphine Bagarry
2 juin 2017 · 🌐

La Provence était en direct.
2 juin 2017 · 🌐

Manosque : suivez en direct la visite du Premier ministre Édouard Philippe

9 likes · 1 commentaire

J'aime Commenter Partager

Source. <https://www.facebook.com/delphinebagarry04>

Table 7. Posting time by type of shared media

	Before	Live	After
Media			
TV	23.5	4.4	72.1
Radio	25.2	1.9	72.9
Press	5.3	1.4	93.3
Online	2.4	0	97.6

More than 90 posts from candidates Facebook pages are related to press and online news media and are posted after their diffusion. In other words, candidates do not advertise the upcoming publication of an interview or an article concerning them in the newspapers. The situation seems a bit different when it comes to an appearance in audiovisual media. This result confirms that candidates post more before the event their appearance on TV or radio to inform their followers. But not all candidates mention their media appearances at the same time (Table 8).

Table 8. Regression: Does the time of sharing depends on the candidates' characteristics?

	Before	Live	After
Age	1.361e-02 (1.660e-02)	0.04146 (0.02962)	2.699e-02 (2.383e-02)
Sex	-1.528e-01 (3.356e-01)	0.28159 (0.55724)	-4.160e-01 (5.349e-01)
First-time elected	9.631e-01 (7.926e-01)	-1.35277 (1.36016)	-5.624e-01 (8.946e-01)
Urban district	5.075e-01 (5.887e-01)	0.87868 (1.10869)	-7.044e-01 (1.113e+00)
Citations in Factiva	2.228e-04 (4.230e-04)	-0.04820* (0.02043)	-4.353e-04 (4.641e-04)
Number of Facebook publications	2.300e-02** (7.412e-03)	0.02185* (0.01072)	6.529e-02*** (1.592e-02)

Signif. codes: 0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1

The number of Facebook posts seems to be the only significant variable in all cases. In other words, the more a candidate relays traditional media content on his Facebook page, the more likely it is that it will be shared before, during or after it is published by the

media. This first result seems logical: the more active a candidate is in sharing traditional media content, the more the probability that he has shared this content at different times. We also note that, concerning live sharing, the number of citations of the candidate in Factiva also has an impact. The more a candidate is cited in Factiva, the less he will tend to publish live media content. Indeed, one might think that the candidates who publish live traditional news media content are the candidates most in search of visibility, namely the least present the media. But the main result of this regression may not be there. As concerning the Research question 1, it lies in the fact that none of the classic socio-demographic variables (gender, age, electoral district, number of terms of office of the deputy) is significant with regard to the timing of the sharing.

The frame of the publications was also analyzed. For candidates, sharing news media content online seems to serve two main purposes: posting issue-oriented content (environment, economy, etc.) or posting content about themselves. We classify these two possibilities into two objectives: ‘expert’, when the candidate posting on thematic issues positioning himself on the subject; and ‘personalization’, when the candidate relaying media content about him to draw attention to himself. Table 9 below presents our results.

Table 9. Frame of the publication on Facebook

Frame of the publication	Number of publications	% of publications	Average number of publications by candidate	Median
Expert	126	14.4	0.7	0
Personalization	716	82.1	3.9	3
Other	30	3.4	0.2	0

More than 80 per cent of the media content posted on Facebook by candidates is about themselves. During the campaign, candidates have to attract the attention on themselves

to strengthen their notoriety. It allows to generate the public awareness and support and to anchor them locally. One more time, this result seems to go against the idea of the nationalization of campaigns. This result seems contrary to that of Écormier-Nocca and Louis-Sidois (2019). They demonstrate that there is no individualization of deputies on Twitter in France during the 2017 election campaign. They show that this individualization remains limited, dissent can be explained by collective logics of party reorganization, which remain, according to them, the structuring factors in the explanation of the positions of the deputies.

Table 10 below presents the results depending on the characteristics of the candidates.

Table 10: Regression: Does candidates' positioning depend on their characteristics?

	Expert	Personnalization
Age	2.562e-02 (1.709e-02)	5.229e-03 (2.171e-02)
Sex	-1.823e-01 (3.396e-01)	-1.187e-01 (4.776e-01)
First-time elected	-1.010e+00 (6.243e-01)	1.332e+00. (7.040e-01)
Urban district	3.515e-01 (5.869e-01)	-1.038e+00 (1.099e+00)
Citations in Factiva	-8.199e-04 (8.737e-04)	3.988e-06 (4.490e-04)
Number of Facebook publications	2.539e-02*** (7.502e-03)	5.926e-02 *** (1.396e-02)


Signif. codes: 0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1


As with the other indicators tested, the traditional socio-demographic variables of the candidates have no influence on their propensity to highlight either, on the one hand, their expertise, or on the contrary, their person as such. However, once again the number of publications relaying content from traditional media is significant. In other words, the


more a candidate publishes this type of content, the more likely he is to relay content respectively allowing him to highlight his expertise, but also his personality.

In this second part of the results, we have shown that most of the news content shared occurred *after* its initial publication by mainstream media sources. When candidates share content from or about traditional news media, they do so primarily to highlight their presence in these outlets to their audience, rather than directly encouraging them to follow these interventions in full. They seem to be thinking in terms of image building. Furthermore, the frame of these posts was much more to emphasize the person of the candidate and his general presentation (more than 84%), more than to position him as an expert on a particular topic. This observation could echo the context of the 2017 campaign. Indeed, the weariness of citizens towards the political class was great. This has enabled a new generation of candidates who have recently entered politics. The latter, aware of the weariness of citizens, therefore, seem to have sought to position themselves much more as involved citizens than as experts in a particular political field.

More specifically, we qualitatively observed the content posted by candidates in both the 'personalization' and 'experts' categories. Only 15.8% of content in the 'personalization' category is not introduced by a personal message from the candidate presenting or commenting on the shared content. In the vast majority of cases, this sentence is used to emphasize the key points identified by the candidate in his or her post. Candidate Laetitia Avia, for example, takes advantage of these few words to, in each of her publications, appeal to a strong element in her portrait, linked to the spirit of renewal of the En Marche candidates. She refers in turn to the authenticity of her commitment, the fact that she's new to politics, or the participatory spirit of En Marche (4) :

PRESS  4th cover of Libération] Proud of this portrait in Libération, authentic and sincere, reflecting my commitment to our country 😊. #LaetitiaDeputee #circo7508 http://www.liberation.fr/france/2017/06/07/laetitia-avia-macronista_1575122?utm_campaign=Echobox&utm_medium=Social&utm_source=Twitter#link_time=1496862362' (5)

'[PRESS  Causette] Causette magazine has drawn up portraits of women who are entering politics for the first time, with all that this entails in terms of satisfaction but also sacrifice. It's about the price of commitment that I'm more than ever ready to pay to contribute to our country's recovery alongside Emmanuel Macron.👊 #LaetitiaDeputee #circo7508'(6).


'[PRESS  Grazia.fr] Why did you choose La République En Marche movement? It's my first political commitment. I like the realism and pragmatism of our approach. I like that we go beyond the comfort of partisan cleavages to seek what's best for the French. Above all, we're a movement that listens to what's happening on the ground, through our committees and our thousands of walkers. For me, this is essential: you have to listen if you hope to be heard.#LaetitiaDeputee #circo7508'(7).

Candidates also recall their local roots, positioning themselves on the side of civil society:

'I've always been a committed woman. I want to make a difference by participating in this renewal as a member of civil society. My determination will make me a 100% deputy. I have strong local roots, I still have family in Décines

and I'm very active through my volunteer work for the National Center for Armenian Remembrance. Emmanuel Macron is proposing to take part in a great national movement to get France moving. Hope is on the march. Follow the live debate between the candidates for the legislative elections in the 13th constituency: <http://www.leprogres.fr/rhone/2017/05/29/les-candidats-aux-legislatives-dans-la-13e-circonscription-en-debat> #Cazarian2017 #circo6913 #LREM69 #LREM #LaRepubliqueEnMarche #EnMarche'(8).

Finally, others don't hesitate to cite the first lines of the articles they relay, as is the case on Amélie de Montchalin's page, where she takes the opportunity to emphasize the advantages of her corporate career in the political arena:

 We're in the press #1! To separate campaigning and work Amélie de Montchalin, 31, has taken advantage of the political leave provided for in the new labor law (see benchmarks). (...) The young REM candidate in Essonne assures us that her knowledge of how business works enables her to bring added value, including in her approach to issues far removed from her field of expertise. "A secondary school principal told me about his difficulties in motivating teachers nearing retirement. I told him about the coaching programs set up by companies for employees nearing the end of their careers", she explains. <http://www.la-croix.com/France/Politique/Elections-legislatives-candidats-venus-lentreprise-2017-05-29-1200850962>' (9).

Furthermore, 26.1% of posts in the 'expert' category (i.e. almost 10% more than in the 'personalization' category) are not introduced by a lead written by the candidate or his team before relaying the media content of his choice. When these leads are present, they


enable the candidate to make the link between a specific issue or program point and the situation in the constituency in which he or she is running:

‘For young people, an appropriate policy starting in elementary school: reduce CP CE1 classes in REP REP+ to 12 pupils. This is a major challenge in our district, which has 7 REP elementary schools. These 7 schools are themselves attached to 3 collèges: Jean Zay Paul Valery Marcel Pagnol. #circo2601 #jevotemireille #education #REP’ (10).

Some candidates also establish their expertise vis-à-vis their readers by relaying some of the work they have produced on the subject, in journals for example:

‘ Mer et Outre-mer : un mariage de raison pour la France du futur. Philippe FOLLIOT recently wrote an article for the Revue Juridique Politique et Economique de Nouvelle-Calédonie. The article is entitled "Mer et Outre-mer: un mariage de raison pour la France du futur" (Sea and Overseas: a marriage of convenience for the France of the future). You can read the article by clicking on the link below: <http://www.philippe-folliot.fr/?p=14476>’ (11).

Others simply introduce the content shared by the main elements establishing their proposal:

‘ Pragmatism and simplification for the systemic reform of labor law in in-depth consultation with the social partners. Ordinances for rapid and effective implementation at the end of September. 3 key themes: - Protection of employees' fundamental rights - Clarification and simplification of branch roles - Freedom for companies to reach local agreements’ (12).

These qualitative examples enable us to refine our study of candidates' branding behaviors. These appear to be in line with the image projected of them by the media during the campaign. In other words, in their publications sharing news media content, candidates manage to select certain information from media content about themselves in order to highlight it and build up a branding of their candidacy that is relatively consistent as such, but also relatively consistent with the image of their LREM party.

Discussion

This article aims to analyze the online political branding strategies of La République en Marche (LREM) candidates in the 2017 French legislative elections. It highlights three main findings.

First, candidates who share mainstream media content on Facebook tend to share more local press and personal portraits (than audiovisual, national or expert content). This result seems to support the idea of a localization of the campaign (Pattie & Jonhston, 2003; Neihouser, 2023), as opposed to theses supporting a certain nationalization (Denver, 2002). It also reflects a 'mirror effect' between the initial framing of content by the mainstream media that produces it, and the more personal framing it receives when shared by the candidate on his or her page. While candidates can select the content that suits them best, they can't totally rethink the framing of the content they choose to publish. They can only extend or reinforce the framing initially proposed by the mainstream media. In this sense, while candidates enjoy considerable leeway in the selection of content they choose to share on their Facebook page, they remain constrained by the initial framing of that content. This example sums up the idea of flow and exchange

between mainstream and social media as proposed by Chadwick's 'hybrid media system' (Chadwick, 2017).

Secondly, candidates' branding behaviors on Facebook, when sharing content from mainstream media, are only very partially influenced by socio-demographic and political characteristics. This result is relatively counterintuitive. Indeed, in most cases, we observe no difference between candidates according to their age (Karlsen & Enjolras, 2016), seniority in politics (Jackson & Lilleker, 2011; Koc-Michalska et al., 2014), media presence (Neihouser & Ouellet, 2022), or even gender (Evans & Clark, 2016; Wagner et al., 2017). Thus, the sharing of content from mainstream media on Facebook can be likened to an 'equalizing' practice, insofar as, on the whole, it does not appear to be influenced by the candidate's political and social trajectory. The sharing of media content on Facebook thus becomes a personal branding tool that can also be used by candidates insofar as they are active on Facebook, regardless of their prior presence in the world of politics or the media.

Nevertheless, there are some rare exceptions. The article suggests, thirdly, that new entrants or candidates lacking popularity make more effort than others in their Facebook shares of mainstream media content. For example, first-time candidates share more local newspapers. What's more, the more media presence candidates have, the less live content from mainstream media they share on their page. These findings tend to reinforce the equalizing effect - or even the catch-up effect? - of such publications on Facebook for less well-endowed candidates. They would be particularly inclined to use this tool to assert their local roots and publicize their media appearances. This would provide them with a low-cost means of personal branding, legitimized by the journalistic (rather than

personal) origin of the content relayed. However, these results need to be confirmed empirically in future studies.

Conclusion

By analyzing the role of news content in the branding process of local candidates on social media, we have therefore addressed the following question: what influence do LREM candidates' specific statuses have on their branding behaviors on Facebook? Using an analysis of traditional media content relayed by the candidates on their Facebook pages, we showed that LREM candidates were particularly inclined to relay content from the local press in order to make their personalities better known to voters. Our results seem to point to an equalizing (or even catching-up) effect of this practice in the personal branding work between candidates.

Already influenced by the entrepreneurial culture, En Marche! candidates rush straight into the development of their managerial skills during the legislative elections. The members of En Marche! have positioned themselves as heretics of traditional politics with the aim of reducing their adversaries to the image of representatives of an allegedly sclerotic former political world. This is how much branding work has been done by the party (Fretel, 2019). Far from being only cynical, this positioning testifies to the values shared within it since its creation. By seeking to address voters directly, En Marche! was designed to allow its members to take on an unparalleled collective identity. In this context, the profile of its candidates for deputation has strengthened the party in its process of rapid definition as a brand. This only reinforced the 'start-up culture' that the movement's creators, inspired by certain lessons in management and marketing, had wanted to infuse into its branding (Marland, 2016).

This marketing positioning was necessary since most of the candidates recruited were not anchored in the local political landscape. There was a great risk of appearing as ‘off ground’ candidates. The definition of the En Marche! helped avoid this pitfall and give them the means to establish themselves from a communication point of view. Again, the context was particularly important since the legislative campaign, like the presidential campaign, was played out against a background of suspicion towards mainstream parties. The anti-party positioning and beyond the traditional divisions (represented by the right and the left) enabled the candidates of En Marche! to settle in the political landscape (Cole, 2018). With traditional practices, En Marche! was able to contrast innovative political marketing and language: use of social media, intense political and civic mobilization, horizontalization of the brainstorming process, etc. In a campaign in which a significant part of the public debate was structured around the professional origin of the candidates, the positioning of the party allowed its candidates to reverse the stigma over and transform their political inexperience into strength (Boelaert *et al.*, 2018).

However, - and this could be a limit of this article -, it is important not to overestimate the importance of the communication of candidates in the French legislative elections. In the French presidential model, legislative elections follow the presidential election, the most important election in the country. The domination of the presidential election thus favours the personalization of politics - especially around the president. In these conditions, after the election of Emmanuel Macron to the presidency, the LREM candidates in the legislative elections could be seen as representatives of the president's party rather than as candidates in their own right. Their individual communication could be relatively less observed by voters than in a parliamentary system. That is why more research about constituency candidates and their online communication, particularly in parliamentary systems, are needed to explore personal branding strategies.

From the hybrid media system point of view, this study shows in an original way how flows of contents can be shared from traditional news media to social media for political communication purpose. By selecting and sharing content from mainstream news media, local politicians attempt to project a favorable image based on what others - journalists - say about them. Here, the news media are not used as a source of information, but as a support for a branding strategy. This highlights both the hybridization of the role of the media both as communication channels but also as a credible reference. In this context, more research on how politicians build their personal brand using traditional news media seems necessary to understand their motivations but also the effects on voters.

Notes

- (1) After the presidential election, Emmanuel Macron's party changed its name to La République En Marche! In order to lighten the text, we will simply use En Marche! or LREM.
- (2) <https://blog.digimind.com/fr/tendances/facebook-chiffres-a-connaître#:~:text=Les%20chiffres%20pour%20la%20France%20%3A%201%20Le,de%209%2C8%20millions%20à%20utiliser%20Facebook%20Éléments%20supplémentaires.>
- (3) Except in the case of paid online advertising, especially in the European Union, Canada and the United States. However, the archiving of these advertisements raises certain issues and important limits (see Dubois *et al.*, 2021; Leerssen *et al.*, 2019).
- (4) Publications have been translated by the authors.
- (5) Avia, Laetitia. 8 june 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/1144227345687416/posts/1195115867265230/>.
- (6) Avia, Laetitia. 7 june 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/1144227345687416/posts/1194416887335128/>.

- (7) Avia, Laetitia. 6 june 2017,
<https://www.facebook.com/1144227345687416/posts/1193407447436072/>.
- (8) Cazarian, Danièle. 29 may 2017,
<https://www.facebook.com/436086886749212/posts/440053049685929/>.
- (9) Montchalin (de), Amélie. 31 may 2017,
<https://www.facebook.com/779067202250269/posts/790572174433105/>.
- (10) Clapot, Mireille. 22may 2017,
<https://www.facebook.com/1356918017734190/posts/1366927203399938/>.
- (11) Folliot, Philippe. 22 may 2017.
<https://www.facebook.com/506491596140473/posts/1201364556653170/>.
- (12) Holroyd, Alexandre. 7 june 2017,
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