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Media Literacy Web Challenges During Five Digital Parliamentary Campaigns in Bulgaria (2021–2023)

ABSTRACT

Since 2021 the Bulgarians had to go to the polls for five national parliamentary votes (one regular - April 4, 2021 and four early – July 11 and November 14, 2021, October 2, 2022, and April 2, 2023). Internet platforms, social media and especially social networks became increasingly popular channels for politicians to communicate with voters. The aim of the study focuses on the media literacy web challenges during the digital Parliamentary pre-election communication between politicians and society. The object is the specifics of the one-month campaigns. The subject refers to the digital election messages of political parties' leaders presented in their Facebook profiles. The study is interdisciplinary and it uses mixed research methods. The results are indicative for those interested in digital political communication. The structured and analyzed information can be utilized into patterns for policy support for decision makers, academia, media, telecommunications, media literacy experts, general publics and private sector.

KEY WORDS

Digital Communication. Facebook. Media Literacy. Pre-election Campaign. Social Networks.

1 Introduction

In contemporary times, societies are challenged by notable political and economic transformations accompanying the dynamic developments of information and communication technologies. The changes in the Bulgarian media ecosystem of today, which encompasses the well-established traditional media with the potential of the blogosphere, social networks and mobile communications, are being catalysed by the critical junctures in these transformations. Due to the globalization processes, the media themselves are undergoing a multi-layered metamorphosis.

Nowadays, media are among the main factors for the deliberative democracy, which should ensure fair and reasonable debate among citizens. Traditional and modern Internet-based media interact with people's daily routine. Although social media stimulate publics to express their opinions, share content and communicate in a personalized way, they are often open to manipulation and inhibit public debates on important societal issues. The concept of media literacy addresses the potential of contemporary societies for their resilience to the negative effects of declining public trust due to highly polarized politics.

1.1 Information, Digital and Media Literacy

Defining media literacy in contemporary communication process faces a multi-complex approach. Following the transition from an economy based on material goods to one based on knowledge[1], in post modernity[2], the diffusion between information and technology has been a prerequisite for blurring the lines between the physical, digital, and biological spheres. Thus, the present-day knowledge-based society upgrades the achievements of disseminating of raw data by the information society to transforming this data into integrated resources that allow people to take effective action.[3]

Information literacy forms the basis for lifelong learning, enabling individuals of different educational backgrounds to find, critically and competently evaluate, accurately and creatively use, and responsibly communicate information in all its various formats efficiently and effectively, in regard with acquisition of knowledge, as well as in situations requiring decision making or problem solving.[4]

While information literacy has a closer tie to library science, media literacy is more related to the social effects of content created by the media industry.

Unifying information literacy and media literacy as a composite concept considering the right to freedom of expression and access to information through ICTs has been tackled by UNESCO in the first of a kind significant publication on the matter. *Media and Information Literacy. Policy & Strategy Guidelines* offers a multifaceted harmonized approach to developing national policies, legal framework and regulatory mechanisms for better media and information environment.[5] Also, a UNESCO handbook *Journalism, "Fake News" & Disinformation* provides

[1]   DRUCKER, P.: *The Age of Discontinuity*. London : Taylor & Francis, 1992, p. 264.
[2]   LYOTARD, J.: *The Postmodern Condition*. Manchester : Manchester University Press, 1984, p. 16.
[3]   *Toward Knowledge Societies*. [online]. [2023-08-12]. Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000141843>.
[4]   RAYCHEVA, L.: Media Literacy Challenges on Debates on Civic Rights. In *Postcolonial Directions in Education*, 2022, Vol. 11, No. 1, p. 14. [online]. [2023-08-12]. Available at: <https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/bitstream/123456789/99027/1/PDE11%281%29A1.pdf>.
[5]   See: GRIZZLE, A., MOORE, P., DEZUANNI, M. et al.: *Media and Information Literacy: Policy and Strategy Guidelines*. Paris : UNESCO, 2013. [online]. [2023-08-12]. Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000225606>.

an internationally-relevant open model curriculum, responding to the emerging global problem of disinformation that confronts societies in general, and journalism in particular.[6]

Digitalization has led to the profound proliferation of information spread across the Internet. The netizens, i.e., the citizens of the Net, represent the new globalized way of communication.[7] However, the rapid development of digital technologies may create a risk of digital divide, thus hampering some citizens' informed participation in democratic processes. That is why the ability of digital literacy to find, organize, evaluate, create, and disseminate information in various platforms using digital technology supplements the managerial particularities of information literacy and the communication specifics of media literacy, thus contributing to knowledge development.

Taking into account the radically transforming media economy due to mobility, user generated communication, Internet and booming availability of digital products, in 2007 the Commission launched a communication titled *A European Approach to Media Literacy in the Digital Environment.* It defines media literacy as *"the ability to access the media, to understand and to critically evaluate different aspects of the media and media contents and to create communications in a variety of contexts.*[8]*"*

For more than two decades, media literacy has been in the focus of research and discussion by the European Platform of Regulatory Authorities (EPRA).[9] Recommendations for the improvement of the campaigns on disinformation carried out in compliance with the provisions of the Code of Practice have been issued in the *Improving Media Literacy Campaigns on Disinformation* report, published by the *European Regulators Group for Audiovisual Media Services*.[10]

Created in 2017, The Media Literacy Index aims to measure the potential for resilience to 'post-truth', 'fake-news' and their consequence in a number of European countries and contribute to finding solutions. Its last report of 2023 scores and ranks 41 countries in Europe. It leans on indicators for media freedom, quality of education, interpersonal trust and e-participation. Only Turkey, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Northern Macedonia and Georgia are worse than Bulgaria (35), which ranks last in the European Union in terms of resistance to the spread of fake news.[11]

1.2 The Bulgarian Parliamentary Elections in 2021-2023

Bulgaria is a unitary parliamentary republic. Nowadays, the political environment in the country is characterized by constant migration between parties, which escalates in the use of more populist approaches by all political forces in the country, regardless of whether they are left or right, especially in a pre-election situation.

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6 See: IRETON, C., POSETTI, J.: *Journalism, Fake News & Disinformation: Handbook for Journalism, Education and Training.* Paris : UNESCO, 2018. [online]. [2023-08-12]. Available at: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1641987?ln=en>.

7 HAUBEN, M.: The Netizens and Community Networks. In *Computer-Mediated Communication Magazine,* 1997, Vol. 4, No. 2. No pagination. [online]. [2023-08-12]. Available at: <http://www.december.com/cmc/mag/1997/feb/hauben.html>.

8 *A European Approach to Media Literacy in the Digital Environment. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions.* [online]. [2023-08-12]. Available at: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A52007DC0833>.

9 *European Platform of Regulatory Authorities.* [online]. [2023-08-12]. Available at: <https://www.epra.org>.

10 *Improving Media Literacy Campaigns on Disinformation.* [online]. [2023-08-12]. Available at: <https://erga-online.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/ERGA-SG2-Report-2020-Improving-Media-Literacy-campaigns-on-disinformation.pdf>.

11 *How It Started, How It Is Going. Media Literacy Index.* [online]. [2023-08-12]. Available at: <https://osis.bg/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/MLI-report-in-Bulgarian-29.06.pdf>.

The dynamics of the five parliamentary votes (one regular – April 4, 2021 and four early – July 11 and November 14, 2021, October 2, 2022, and April 2, 2023) as well as of the regular presidential one (November 14, 2021) show interesting trends. All of them were conducted in a situation of chronic global uncertainty in such social spheres as health care (especially under the conditions of COVID 19 epidemic), economics, politics, etc. Additionally, complications arose both from the tense international situation with the military actions in Ukraine, as well as from the high peaks of inflation and the growing intolerance for a normal and meaningful dialogue between political formations. As a result, the drop in voter turnout was indicative. Following the regular elections of 04/04/2021 (50.61%), it fell below 50%. The quantity of political candidates also declined. The number of those voters who supported no one gradually almost doubled. All campaigns were conducted in conditions of political confrontation, hostile public speaking and disregarded professional standards. (Table 1).

Elections	04.04.2021 (regular)	11.07.2021 (early)	14.11.2021 (early)	02.10.2022 (early)	02.04.2023 (early)
Parties	17	15	19	23	14
Coalitions	12 (53 parties)	8 (50 parties)	8 (47 parties)	6 (24 parties)	7 (30 parties)
Independent	2	1	2	2	2
Voters	6,789,605	6,873,784	6,946,852	6,850,969	6,862,409
Votes cast	3,334,283	2,775,754	2,669,260	2,601,900	2,682,338
Voter turnout	50.61%	42.19%	40.23%	39.41%	40.69%
Not supporting anyone	47,749	35,201	35,745	87,635	109,095

TABLE 1: *Dynamics of the 45th, 46th, 47th, 48th and 49th Parliamentary elections*
Source: Parliamentary Elections. Results. [online]. [2023-08-12]. Available at: <https://results.cik.bg/>.

The unclear ideological messages in the election programs and the fatigue of frequent votes focused the competitors' attention on the slogans disseminated by the media, rather than on other public forms during the one-month of election campaigning (Table 2). Nevertheless, the voters were sceptical about the ability of any alternative to change the status quo in the country's executive power, shaped by three decades of transition to political pluralism and a market-place economy.

Political formation	04.04.2021 (regular)	11.07.2021 (early)	14.11.2021 (early)	02.10.2022 (early)	02.04.2023 (early)
Coalition *Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria – Union of Democratic Forces (CEDB-UDF)*	Work, Work, Work	Order in Chaos	*Stronger than Chaos*	*Stronger than Chaos*	*For a Stable Bulgaria Again*
Coalition *We Continue the Change – Democratic Bulgaria (WCC-DB)*	-	-	-	-	*There Is a Way*
Political party *There Is Such a People (TISP)*	You Are the Deciding Vote.	It's Time for Something Else	The State – This Is You	-	*The State – This Is You All*
Coalition *Bulgarian Socialist Party for Bulgaria (BSP for Bulgaria)*	With Care for People	Security in Change. With Care forYou	*Reasonable Solutions*	*For a Social and Safe Country*	*Yes! We can!*
Political party *Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF)*	Restarting Statehood	Restarting Statehood	*For the Unity of the Nation*	*Security and Stability*	*Reason, Responsibility, Dialogue*

Coalition *Democratic Bulgaria (DB)*	Bulgaria Can Do Much More	Freedom. Legality. Modernization	It's Time for Bulgaria to Win	Trust in Reason	-
Coalition *Stand up! Goons Out! (SU-GO)*	Имаме план We Have a Plan for Bulgaria	Stand up! Goons Out!	-	-	-
Coalition *We Continue the Change (WCC)*	-	-	We Continue the Change	Let's Finish Our Work	-
Political party *Revival*	-	-	*It's Time for a Revival*	*It's Time for Us for a Revival*	*Choose Freedom*
Coalition *Bulgarian Rise (BR)*	-	-	-	Safe for Tomorrow	-

TABLE 2: *Slogans of political formations elected in the 45th, 46th, 47th, 48th and 49th Parliament*
Source: Parliamentary Elections. Results. [online]. [2023-08-12]. Available at: <https://results.cik.bg/>.

The pre-election campaigns in Bulgaria during the period of democratization since 1989 have developed alongside the transformation of the media system, giving way to the rise of two mutually bound processes – politicization of media and mediatization of politics.[12] An important feature of the transformation of the media environment, apart from its demonopolization by the state, was the redesign of the media into a subject of commercial relations. Although the guild adopted its *Code of Ethics* in 2004,[13] it failed to build effective mechanisms for its implementation and in many cases reacted inadequately both to socially significant events and to professional problems.

A key factor for the development of the Bulgarian media environment was the implementation of modern information and communication technologies. Nowadays, Internet platforms and especially social networks have become increasingly popular channels for politicians to communicate with voters. However, these new possibilities imply the challenges to the information, digital and media literacy of people to make their informed choices.[14]

2 Methodology

The aim of the study focuses on the media literacy web challenges during the digital Parliamentary pre-election communication between politicians and society. The object is the specifics of the one-month campaigns. The subject of the research refers to the digital election messages of political parties' leaders presented in their *Facebook* profiles. The scope of the examination includes those political forces which passed the 4% threshold.

The study is interdisciplinary and it uses mixed research methods, among them: exploring academic sources, sociological surveys, regulatory frameworks and media and telecommunications practices, conducting comparative analysis of the derived data from the election messages of political leaders in their *Facebook* profiles and qualitative assessment of written semi-structured interviews with broader publics. The study examines the verbal and non-verbal communication of MP candidates, the quality of their messages in terms of positivism, negativism or neutrality, as well as their commitment to social, health, economic,

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[12] RAYCHEVA, L.: The Digital Notion of the Citizen-Centered Media Ecosystem. In *International Journal of Digital Television,* 2018, Vol. 9, No. 3, p. 241.
[13] *Code of Ethics of Bulgarian Media.* [online]. [2023-08-12]. Available at: <https://mediaethics-bg.org/>.
[14] RAYCHEVA, L., ZANKOVA, B., MITEVA, N. et al.: *Bulgaria. Risks and Opportunities Related to Media and Journalism Studies (2000−2020).* [online]. [2023-08-12]. Available at: <https://www.mediadelcom.eu/publications/d21-case-study-1/blg/>.

technological and other important topics related to the welfare of the population in the country as an EU and NATO member-state. Frequencies of the usage of *Facebook* by political leaders, issues that dominate their messages, and the digital activity of the audiences have also been tracked. The qualitative study was based on the methodological framework developed by the University of Tartu, Estonia: a written diary with semi-structured questionnaires for members of 50 observed families and an explanatory essay about their media preferences during the one-month campaigns (October 14 – November 14, 2021) for president and vice president and the early one - for Parliament. It has been carried out on a voluntary basis by BA students during their first admission year at the Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication of the St. Kliment Ohridski Sofia University. They have signed an informed consent to participate in the research.

The analysis is focused on three main research questions: 1. Why do people prefer certain media for information during the election campaign? 2. Is there a liaison between the activity in the social network *Facebook* and the number of interactions with the result of the elections? 3. What are the media literacy web challenges during the digital political campaigns?

3 Results

The rapid and intensive development of technologies, the quicker access to the Internet, the ability to use the networks from different devices facilitate the digital communication. The option to connect with people in real time and without intervention of the traditional media, thus avoiding possible interpretations, makes social networks an increasingly preferred means of communication of politicians with their potential voters. Results convincingly show that all participants in the pre-election campaigns in the studied period, and not only those who crossed the 4% barrier, bet extremely seriously on their presence on *Facebook*. However, audiences of social networks increasingly prefer easily digestible video information and they more often make their choices emotionally than rationally. Thus, they gradually become passive and inert, making no significant effort to get quality information.

3.1 Empirical Study on the Facebook Profiles of the Leaders of the Political Forces in the 2021-2023 Parliamentary Elections

The elections for national Parliament (2021-2023) were held in a situation of growing insecurity, such as chronic social protests for judicial reforms and against corruption, the tensions of COVID 19 pandemic, rising inflation, and shortage of political vision. These challenges discouraged people from actively and socially meaningful participation in public debates.

Only half of the ten political formations that passed the 4% threshold in the five Parliamentary elections participated in all studied votes and belonged to political groups in the European Parliament. Obviously, this experience was among the reasons of the comparatively successful campaign of their leaders via *Facebook* messages.

Members of the centre-right *European People's Party (EPP)* are the winners in three out of the five Parliamentary elections: *Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria* and *Union of Democratic Forces*, which form a coalition (*CEDB-UDF*). In the other two votes they remained second. The coalition ruled the country (with other allied parties) for more than a decade (2009-2013, 2014-2017, and 2017-2021). The leader of *CEDB,* Boyko Borisov, was pretty active on his *Facebook* profile. The tendency for most of the posts which gathered thousands of likes, comments and shares was for the post to be supported by video or photo material. In all three election campaigns, also messages of the *EPP* leaders who declared their support for Borisov were included. The generally rational, pragmatic campaign was characteristic for

the ex-prime minister's *Facebook* page. He was trying to play the role of a unifier of the nation. Rumen Hristov - the leader of *UDF*, the coalition partner of *CEDB*, although not that popular in the social network, also registered thousands of followers and likes in his *Facebook* profile.

Negativism against the winning *CEDB-UDF* seemed to be a more unifying factor for the other political forces running for the Parliament, instead of the deliberative discussion on the issues important for the country. The caretaker governments, appointed by the President, and the narrow perimeter of their duration would hardly help for their solution. Thus, it became quite possible to add a political crisis to the health, economic, social and institutional ones – a telling trend to the erosion of democracy.

The political party *Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria (DSB)* also belongs to the *EPP* group. It is part of the Coalition *Democratic Bulgaria (DB),* together with the political parties *Yes, Bulgaria (YB)* and *The Greens.* The coalition ranges from national conservatism and anti-corruption movement to green politics. Overall, the style and approach of *DB* co-chair Atanas Atanasov's *(DSB) Facebook* campaign for all elections were almost identical. The main difference was in the number of publications and likes. He relied on a more rational than emotional approach. The campaign of *DB* co-chairman Hristo Ivanov *(YB)* (a former law minister in the second *CEDB* cabinet) on his official *Facebook* page did not differ stylistically in all elections. He bet more on expert speaking and not so much on emotional personal posts. His main messages were related to the need for an independent judicial system, a better vaccination policy, more investments and fight against corruption. Although the co-chairs collected a number of likes, comments and shares, the coalition headed by them could not rank higher. However, the desire to be in power led them to conclude an unprincipled agreement with political forces with an incompatible profile (*BSP* and *TISP*). Precisely for this reason, for 2023 elections they formed a coalition with the newly founded *We Continue the Change (WCC)*, which is a centrist, anticorruption electoral alliance led by Kiril Petkov and Asen Vasilev, both former caretaker ministers.

The coalition *WCC* was a typical example of the migration of conjectural political forces in the country. Kiril Petkov's *Facebook* profile changed with each of the three campaigns he participated in – from positive (higher education abroad, change, new faces, intelligence, successful career, selflessness and lack of personal interests) to negative (against corruption of the opponents and the need for change). The other co-chairman of *WCC,* Asen Vasilev, did not maintain a *Facebook* profile. Nevertheless, the social network contributed a lot to the popularity of the new formation, which, winning the elections in November 2021, formed a difficult regular government under a coalition of political forces of different persuasions. Several weeks later, however, it became the first government in Bulgarian history to lose a vote of confidence. After the 2023 elections, a non-coalition government was formed in which *WCC-DB,* under a vague platform, allied with its main political opponent *CEDB-UDF* (the winner) and accepted the support of the other political opponent *DPS*, thereby drastically violating its pre-election promises. The *WCC* and *DB* campaigns, separately and in a coalition, were the most heavily subsidized ones.

The only representative in the country of the centre-left, *Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D)* of *the EP,* is the *Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP).* In a variety of coalitions named *BSP for Bulgaria* it participated in all of the studied Parliamentary elections and was part of the six months government led by *WCC,* together with *DB* and *There Is Such a People (TISP).* Due to internal contradictions, the Coalition suffered from escalating decrease of the number of MPs, although in all pre-election campaigns, its leader, Kornelia Ninova, focused in her *Facebook* profile mostly on positive, constructive and reasonable messages. With clear measures to overcome the crisis in the various sectors, it demonstrated energy and will for their realization. Her visual expression was cheerful and smiling and her speech was to the point, business-like, without unnecessary emotions. She stood firmly against the *CEDB-UDF*.

The centrist political party *Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF),* with a support base among Turkish ethnic minority communities, belongs to the liberal *Renew Europe (Renew)* political group of the *EP*, a successor to the *Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe*

(ALDE). It also participated in all five Parliamentary elections of the studied period. The pre-election campaigns of *DPS*, expressed on the *Facebook* profile of the leader Mustafa Karadayi, were extremely modest. The strategy in his *Facebook* profile was non-standard - unobtrusive and casual. Verbal communication was almost non-existent. There was no tension from the upcoming race, but rather confidence and calmness. It showed that *DPS* did not rely only on the election campaign in the social network, but on a solid electorate.

The populist political party *There Is Such a People* (TISP) came second in the regular elections. It became the leader in the vote in July 2021 thanks to the Bulgarians living abroad, but not for those paying their taxes in Bulgaria. Four months later, in November, it fell to fifth place. In 2022, it did not pass the 4% threshold, while in the 2023 elections, it was the last to enter the Parliament. Presenting itself as a "political product", the party was named after one of the music albums of its leader, a popular TV performer Slavi Trifonov and its Coo-Coo band. The rise of this political formation actually continued the trend around the world of TV and show business stars entering politics. The pre-election campaigns for all four votes on Trifonov's *Facebook* profile were similar, and the activity, although not great, was decreasing. He preferred emotional tone rather than rational messages. Gradually, however, *TISP* drifted unprincipled from its initial program. Most of the posts, complemented with videos from Trifonov's own TV station – 7/8, gathered a lot of interactions with thousands of likes, comments and shares.

Revival is a nationalist political party with rising number of MPs in the last three Parliaments. Its founder and chairman is Kostadin Kostadinov. The party defines itself as a patriotic formation. However, it has also been classified by various analysts and media as anti-European and anti-Western. Its leader organized a referendum against the adoption of the euro as a national currency. In accordance with Kostadinov's serious activity in his *Facebook* profile was the growing number of likes, comments and references of publications made by his followers. One of the main themes in Kostadinov's rhetoric was his position on the non-interference of the country in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine and the lifting of sanctions against Russia. According to him, the real aggressor in this war are the United States. His posts are based on facts, but inspired and at times – extreme. His demeanor is ambitious and steadfast. In his speeches, however, a large dose of populism can be detected. He often emphasizes the emotional approach, trying to present *Revival* as the only political alternative.

Bulgarian Rise (BR) is a national conservative political party. It was founded by its leader – the former caretaker prime minister and defence minister Stefan Yanev in the *PP-DB-BSP-TISP* government. As such, he was dismissed from office after he had refused to define Russia's special military operation against Ukraine as a war. There is little consensus over the party's stances on economic matters. The party has garnered some criticism for not expressing substantive positions on most political issues. The leader of *Bulgarian Rise* is laconic in his *Facebook* posts, but often uses photos and video to communicate with his online audience. He was one of the few leaders to present the main highlights of the party's pre-election program in his messages.

The most eclectic coalition, *Stand Up! Goons Out!* (*SUGO*), united several political formations of quite different profiles – social democratic, environmental, populist, liberal, agrarian, etc. The two leaders – Maya Manolova, a former member and a MP of the socialist party, and a former national ombudsman Nikolay Hadgigenov, a lawyer and one of the three members of the "Poisonous Trio" – the coordinators of the 2020 protests, did not provide consolidated platform for the regular election of 04.04. and for the early one on 11.07. For the early election of 14.11., although the political formation changed its name to *Stand Up! We Are coming!* (*SUWAC*) and only one leader was left - Maya Manolova, the coalition did not pass the 4% threshold. The *Facebook* page of the *SUGO/SUWAC* coalition leader, Maya Manolova, was very active, but populist promises dominated in her strategy and thus the coalition did not pass the 4% threshold in the following votes.

The comparison of the studied pre-election campaigns displayed that almost all politicial leaders had accounts and had been relatively active in their *Facebook* campaigns. Nevertheless, there was no direct correlation between the *Facebook* presence and the results of the elections. The findings of the study showed that funding invested in political advertising, scope of media activity, populism, hate speech and online interactions were not sufficient for electoral prevalence. Deficits in purposeful political messages and in clear party programs were the more serious challenges to the developments of deliberative democracy. It became clear that the growing impact of social networks on the process of communication between society and political leaders confirmed the assumption that this model of interaction would rigorously develop.

3.2 Qualitative Assessment of Written Semi-Structured Interviews on Media Literacy

Modern societies are characterized as communicative constructions[15] by hybrid media context in the ontology of the social sphere.[16] The rapid development of information and communication technologies in recent years has created the need in audiences to acquire new skills and to improve them continuously. This situation creates a disturbing trend of permanent alienation of certain social groups, who have not had to work in a high-tech environment and who have not acquired the habits of using new technologies and the Internet. Media and digital literacy have grown from specific professional competencies to a mandatory condition for adaptation and orientation in the modern digital world.

According to the *National Statistical Institute* data, the share of people between the ages of 65 and 74 who have regularly used the Internet in 2021 is 30.8%. In comparison, regular Internet users between the ages of 55 and 64 comprise 63.1%, and those between 45 and 54 - 82.1%. Among young people, the share rises to over 90%.[17] Social networks, however, are not particularly popular among people over 65 in Bulgaria – 44% of respondents use them vs. 55.56% of non-users. Not a single respondent relies on social networks to get informed about news and current affairs.[18]

Nowadays people are characterized by heterogeneous media preferences, which are determined by age, gender, social status, cultural identity, etc. In order to achieve a more reliable information, awareness of hybrid content is often observed in media usage. This notion substantiated the aim of the undertaken study to analyze the use of media among different members of 50 Bulgarian families with regard to their perceptions of information disseminated during the presidential and parliamentary election campaigns of November 2021. Media preferences refer to: listening to the radio; consumption of music streaming services; watching TV, films and videos (including on demand); reading newspaper and online news; reading magazines; reading books; usage of social media.[19]

When describing the media environment and access to media, it is noteworthy that, regardless of the age group, almost every home has a TV set (98%), but only 31% of the respondents possess a radio receiver. The age group of 51-65 and over 65 have radio receivers at home (83%), while young people under 18 and between 19-30 listen to the radio mostly in their car when they are on their way to work or to university (only 19% of them claim that they

[15] COULDRY, N., HEPP, A.: *The Mediated Construction of Reality*. Cambridge : Polity Press, 2017, p. 15.
[16] CHADWICK, A.: *The Hybrid Media System: Politics and Power.* Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2017, p. 11.
[17] *Households with Internet Access at Home.* [online]. [2023-08-12]. Available at: <https://www.nsi.bg/en/content/2808/households-internet-access-home>.
[18] *Trust and Media Usage in 2022.* [online]. [2023-08-12]. Available at: <https://osis.bg/?p=4213>.
[19] See: RAYCHEVA, L., TOMOV, M., VELINOVA, N. et al.: Older Persons Media Usage During a One Month. Election Campaign: A Bulgarian Case Study. In GAO, Q., ZHOU, J. (eds.): *Human Aspects of IT for the Aged Population.* Las Vegas : Springer, 2023, p. 248-260.

have a radio receiver at home). The trend for personal computer ownership is reverse. 74% of the under-aged own a personal computer or have access to a shared one at home, and 95% of the respondents aged 19-30 possess such a device. For the age group 31-50, the percentage is 83, for the 51-65 age group, it is 61%, and for the oldest age group, over 65 years, it is only 6%. Smartphone ownership is similar The Mediated Construction of Reality up to 18 years – 78%, 19-30 years – 94%, 31-50 years – 59%, 51-65 years – 61%, and over 65 years – 5%.

The most used device is TV set (48% of respondents), followed by laptop (26%), smartphone – 21%, and a minor percentage is allocated to radio receiver (4%) and printed publications (1%). The answers regarding the frequency of use of these media are heterogeneous. They are accessed on a daily basis predominantly at home, but also between lectures, in free time, in cases when the respondents are purposefully looking for certain information or are willing to learn more about a particular current topic of social life in the country and abroad.

The mother of one of the respondents said:
"Intensive periods of media use for my elderly parents over 65 years old are mostly during news broadcasts, while for the parents themselves, who belong to the age group of 31-50 years, any time when they are free enough is an intense time to use media. Therefore, the busier they are, the less they access media content. The media-free moments for adults are when they are reading a book, while for us (31-50) there are almost no such moments. No matter the activity, there is always a chance to glance at the smartphone."

From the observations made, it seems that each member of a family had a different media preference and to a large extent it depended on the age group to which he/she belongs.

One of the respondents – a student, says:
"While my grandfather listens to the radio and still prefers mostly print media, my parents have adapted to technologies and boldly use electronic media. My sister and I belong to Generation Z, and for us, print media is rather old-fashioned, while communication on social networks, online learning and the Internet are completely normal."

The study focused also on the most frequently used media (Fig. 1). Online media was the most preferred media by 72% of the respondents. 54% preferred watching TV, while 34% used social media. The percentage favoring print publications and video platforms such as *YouTube* is negligible.
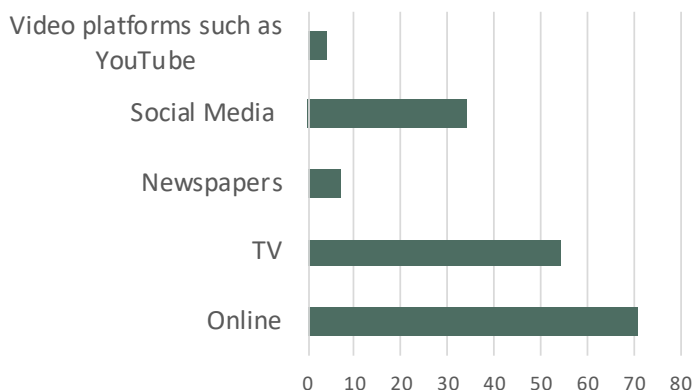

FIGURE 1: *What media do you use most often?*
Source: own processing, 2023

When asked why they use these media more often, 46% answer that they are looking for the information they need on certain topics that interest them, and 29% say that they use certain media for entertainment. Among the remaining responses (Fig. 2) were those for easy access/timely information, convenience and communication.

One of the respondents shared observations about their grandfather's (over 65) media preferences:
"The oldest member of the family does not want to rely on modern methods of information, such as websites and social networks. He has no desire to learn how to handle them and prefers to watch TV and to read newspapers. These media are used for both information and entertainment. The person finds everything he is interested in and does not need other media."
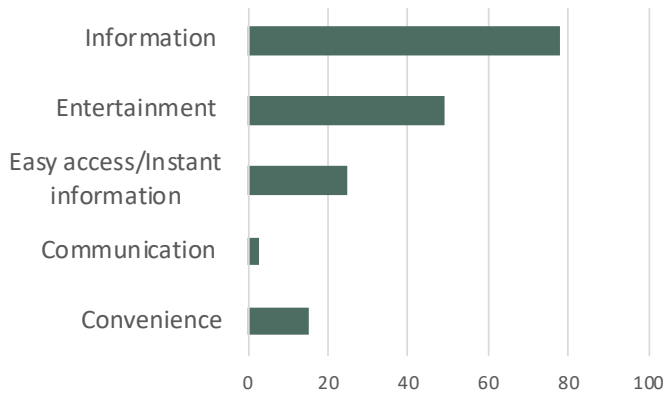

FIGURE 2: *Why do you use these media more often?*
Source: own processing, 2023

Surprisingly, social media or social networks have not been selected by the observed respondents as a reliable source of information.

The poll also paid serious attention to media preferences during election campaigns. 84% of the interviewees, when asked whether they receive the necessary information in media in order to make an informed choice about the presidential or the MP candidates, answered positively, while 16% gave a negative assessment.

When asked why they prefer particular information channels, the respondents gave mixed answers. (Fig. 3). Most of the interviewees – 23%, answered: "To choose who to vote for", and 21% indicated that they trusted the channel. Other responses included: "Convenience", "More information and more detail", "Synthesized information", etc.
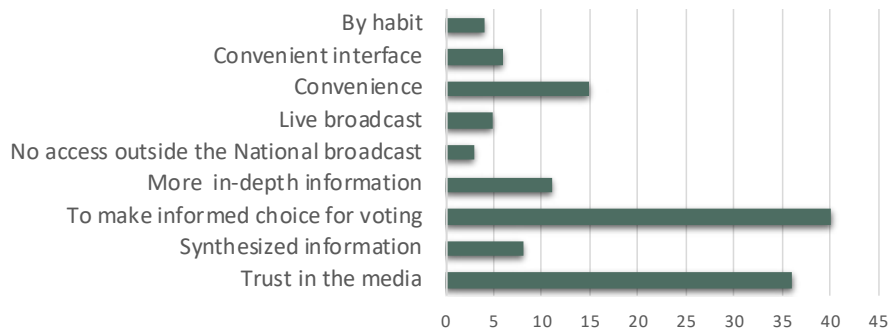

FIGURE 3: *Why do you prefer this channel for information during pre-election campaigns?*
Source: own processing, 2023

Significant questions regarding disinformation in modern communication have also been put by the observing pollsters. They are related to the credibility of the information and they examine whether family members are able to distinguish between reliable facts and fake news. 60% of the respondents answered that they could filter out fake news, while 40% admitted that they could not distinguish between fake and credible facts.

It is noteworthy that according to young people, their parents, and especially grandparents (over 65 years of age), are more vulnerable to fake news.

One of the interviewers noted:
"The older people feel that they have reached a period in their lives when they no longer need to technologically develop their knowledge and skills. They rely solely on other people's opinions or on what they see on television, which is the main source of information for them. Computer illiteracy affects them as it restricts them from searching for additional information online. Reading newspapers and books has long ceased for them and they are completely not aware of the specifics of new media. With younger people, it is just the opposite – they feel that the information they are 'flooded' with should be verified, as they are getting information mainly online. The digital environment they are in allows them to interact with more people, listen to different opinions and distinguish between fake news."

On the other hand, an intergenerational gap exists where young people consider their ancestors to be people with outdated views of the world surrounding them, unprepared for modern technologies, unable to distinguish between fake and credible news, thus becoming subject to political manipulation. Young respondents are confident in the correctness of the information they have chosen, thus displaying the so-called "cognitive dissonance" – they are convinced that they can successfully distinguish fake news from correct data. It is noteworthy that most of the older members of the observed families claim that although accessing different media, younger generations compare neither content, nor sources and tend to trust more easily digestible, but not checked and verified information. The elderly are concerned that their heirs prefer rather emotional than rational perception of information.

4 Discussion

The results of the conducted comparative study of the five pre-election campaigns (for the regular one and for the four early votes in 2021-2023) show that the Bulgarians preferred to be informed first by television, and then by social networks – mostly by *Facebook*. The hypothesis of the increasing impact of social networks on the process of communication between the public and political formations is confirmed. Online communication tends to replace live political contacts with the public, and numerous likes, comments and shares expand the boundaries of the audience. Judging by the quality of the content of the posts, relying on populism in its various dimensions is a profitable strategy. The pre-election slogans of almost all candidates turn out to be a pacifier emptied of content. Aggressive rhetoric is also effective for some of the new political formations. In few of the *Facebook* profiles studied, political leaders clearly presented their programs so that voters could make an informed choice.

In response to the research question, "Why do people prefer certain media for information during the election campaign?", the study outlines in detail the level of trust to the preferred media. Definitely, the messages of the political leaders in their *Facebook* profiles can hardly impact the choice of older people. With regard to the second research question, "Is there a liaison between the activity in the social network and the number of interactions with the result of the elections?", the findings show that *Facebook* activity is not the most important factor in electors' voting. They are also influenced by other forms of election pre-campaigning, as well as

by the value of the MP candidates' previous public activity. As for the third research question, "What are the media literacy web challenges during the digital political campaigns?", the answers indicated several aspects: access to mobile communication devices, knowledge of how to use the various applications, but above all – how to build skills and habits for searching, factchecking and verifying information. This is especially important during pre-election campaigns, so that electors are confident that they make the right choice.

5 Conclusion

The dynamics of the election campaign of the participants in the race for both the 45th, 46th, 47th, 48th, and the regular 49th National Assembly show that neither the amount of funding invested in political advertising, nor the scope of media and online activity, nor populism in its various dimensions turn out to be directly proportional to the success achieved. Deficits in the quality of advertising forms, in the clarity of party programs and in the targeting of messages are the more serious challenge to the informed choice of voters. These discrepancies may lead to the falsification of democracy. The election apathy somehow displaced the initial political euphoria in society – definitely a protest vote of the Bulgarians against the political class. Bulgarian voters refused to yield to any mass media, political and sociological propaganda, especially when dished out along negative lines.[20]

The results of the conducted study are indicative to those interested in contemporary media developments and, especially, in the role that media play in people's lives in hybrid media contexts.

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