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The Impact of Social Media on Political Marketing Education

STUDIA I ANALIZY

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Abstract: This article examines how the evolution of social media transforms the didactics of political marketing in higher education. It identifies key communication phenomena and analyzes their pedagogical implications for curriculum design, teaching methods, and learning outcomes. The research synthesizes recent academic literature from peer-reviewed journals and author's own observations from courses taught at the university to propose recommendations for integrating social media competencies into political science education.

Introduction

Traditional instruction in political marketing has historically concentrated on mass communication media such as television, radio, and the press. Teaching has focused on the behavior of parties and candidates, the principles of campaign strategy design, and established techniques of personal branding and image management. In this earlier media environment, politicians' private lives

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remained largely outside public scrutiny; for example, Franklin D. Roosevelt's use of a wheelchair due to disability was deliberately concealed from public view. In contrast, contemporary digital media have fundamentally altered the boundaries between public and private spheres. Today, everyday activities of political leaders, such as family leisure or vacation choices, are routinely shared and consumed through social media platforms.

The rapid development of social media has fundamentally reshaped contemporary political communication¹. Digital platforms such as Facebook, X, Instagram and TikTok have become essential arenas for political engagement, agenda-setting and campaign strategies, challenging traditional mass media paradigms and communication activities of political actors². At the same time, the rise of artificial intelligence, including generative language models, automated content creation tools, and deepfake technologies, has further accelerated this transformation. Social media platforms introduce constant interaction, algorithmic content mediation, and data-driven targeting, which require new competencies beyond conventional curricula³. These changes have significant implications for politicians, parties, voters, and crucially, educators responsible for training students, future politically aware citizens, marketers or communicators⁴. Despite these transformations, political marketing education has often continued to emphasize traditional patterns of voter behavior, paying comparatively limited attention to the distinctive practices and dynamics of online and social media users.

This article investigates how social media evolution affects the didactics of political marketing and proposes a framework for curriculum adaptation in political science education. The novelty of this article lies in combining two research areas: contemporary digital campaign practices and political science didactics. The academic literature still lacks systematic analyses of how new digital communication phenomena should reshape political marketing curricula.

¹ A. Chadwick, *The Hybrid Media System: Politics and Power*, 2nd ed., New York 2017; Z. Papacharissi (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Digital Media and Democracy*, 1st ed., New York 2026.

² A. Abid, et al., *Political social media marketing: a systematic literature review and agenda for future research*, «Electronic Commerce Research» 2025, vol. 25, pp. 741–776; D. Kreiss, S.C. McGregor, *Technology Firms Shape Political Communication*, «Political Communication» 2018, vol. 35, pp. 155–177.

³ A. Nurdin, et al., *The Role of Social Media in Political Education and Election Socialization Among Generation Z*, «The Journal of Academic Science» 2025.

⁴ J. van Dijck, T. Poell, *Social Media and the Transformation of Public Space*, «Social Media + Society» 2015, vol. 1(2).

The study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: How has the development of social media reshaped political marketing practices?

RQ2: What social media phenomena are most relevant for contemporary political marketing education?

RQ3: To what extent do current curricula reflect these transformations?

RQ4: What didactic tools and teaching strategies are effective for integrating social media into political marketing courses?

Three research propositions are advanced: (1) social media have disrupted traditional political marketing frameworks, (2) political marketing education must integrate digital competencies and critical media literacy, and (3) interactive, project-based methods enhance student preparedness for digital political communication environments.

The methodology combines a systematic literature review, comparative analysis of curricula, and empirical data from sources such as PKW, CBOS, and the Meta Ad Library, alongside case studies of contemporary political campaigns and the author's own observations from courses on "Political Marketing" and "Social Media in Politics" conducted at the University of Warsaw.

Social media and the transformation of political marketing

Rising digital advertising expenditures

Social media have become an increasingly prominent tool in modern business communication and marketing strategies. Unilever, for example, announced in March 2025 that it will allocate half of its advertising budget to social media and collaborate with 20 times more influencers as part of its new strategy, according to the company's new CEO, Fernando Fernandez⁵.

Social media also play a crucial role for politicians. Barack Obama's 2008 campaign was the first campaign in which social media were used systematically and at scale to fully leverage social media for voter mobilization, fundraising, and narrative building⁶. Since then, digital platforms have become indispensable in political campaigns worldwide.

⁵ eMarketer, *Unilever invests half of its budget on an 'influencer first' strategy*, 14.03.2025, <https://www.emarketer.com/content/unilever-invests-half-of-its-budget-on-influencer-first-strategy> (28.12.2025).

⁶ D. Kreiss, *Taking Our Country Back: The Crafting of Networked Politics from Howard Dean to Barack Obama*, Oxford 2012, pp. 1–3, 81–85; A. Chadwick, *The Hybrid Media System...*, pp. 205–210.

In the 2023–2024 election cycle, political ad spending on Google and Meta in the U.S. exceeded \$1.35 billion, with more than half spent in the two months immediately preceding the presidential election, highlighting the growing importance of digital media in campaign strategies⁷. These findings indicate that intensifying spending in the final stage of a campaign is a key factor influencing the reach and effectiveness of political messaging in the digital environment.

The Internet played a relatively significant role in the 2023 parliamentary campaign in Poland. On average, the five largest electoral committees spent about 27% of their campaign budgets on the Internet (mainly on social media advertising), which amounts to approximately 31 million PLN⁸. Of this, around 9.9 million PLN was spent on ads on Facebook and Instagram, and about 7 million PLN on YouTube⁹. During the 2025 presidential campaign in Poland, expenditures on online announcements, videos, spots, and advertisements accounted for 22.5% of Karol Nawrocki's total campaign spending, whereas in the case of Rafał Trzaskowski such expenditures constituted 47.6% of his overall campaign budget¹⁰. A consistent increase in spending on online campaigns, including social media, can be observed over the past several years.

Social media as a source of knowledge about politics

Social media platforms increasingly function as key arenas for political information dissemination and public debate. For a growing segment of the

⁷ Brennan Center for Justice, *Online Ad Spending in the 2024 Election Topped \$1.35 Billion*, 19.12.2024, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/online-ad-spending-2024-election-topped-135-billion> (28.12.2025).

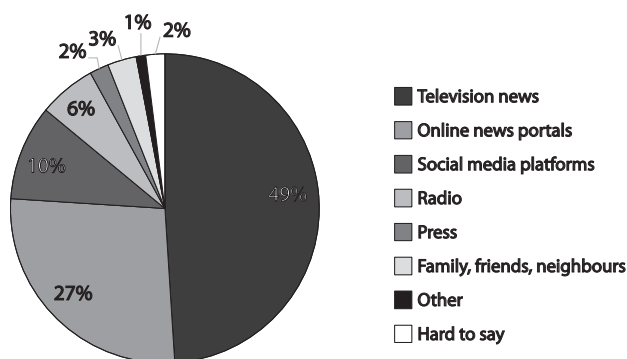
⁸ Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza (National Electoral Commission in Poland), *Sprawozdania finansowe komitetów wyborczych uczestniczących w wyborach do Sejmu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej i do Senatu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej 2023*, Warszawa 2023, <https://pkw.gov.pl/finansowanie-polityki/finansowanie-kampanii-wyborczych/wybory-do-sejmu-i-do-senatu/wybory-do-sejmu-rp-i-do-senatu-rp-2023/sprawozdania-finansowe-komitetow-wyborczych-uczestniczacych-w-wyborach-do-sejmu-rzeczypospolitej-pol> (22.03.2025).

⁹ K. Izdebski (ed.), *Obraz kampanii w mediach społecznościowych: Raport podsumowujący*, Fundacja im. Stefana Batorego 2023.

¹⁰ Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza (National Electoral Commission in Poland), *Komunikat Państwowej Komisji Wyborczej z dnia 17 września 2025 r. w sprawie sprawozdań finansowych komitetów wyborczych uczestniczących w wyborach Prezydenta Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej zarządzonych na dzień 18 maja 2025 r., głosowanie w których przeprowadzone zostało w dniach 18 maja i 1 czerwca 2025 r.*, Warszawa 2025, <https://www.pkw.gov.pl/finansowanie-polityki/finansowanie-kampanii-wyborczych/wybory-prezydenta-rp/wybory-prezydenta-rp-2025/komunikat-panstwowej-komisji-wyborczej-z-dnia-17-wrzesnia-2025-r-w-sprawie-sprawozdan-finansowych-ko> (9.01.2026).

population, they serve as primary sources of political news, shaping issue salience and framing through speed, repetition, and emotion. The growing significance of social media is reflected not only in increasing expenditures on online advertising, but perhaps even more clearly in changes in the sources from which citizens obtain information about politics. In the August 2024 Public Opinion Research Center (CBOS) survey, television was cited as the main source of information about government activities by nearly half of adult respondents in Poland (49%), followed by online news portals (27%) and social media (10%)¹¹ (figure 1).

Figure 1. Sources of information about government activity

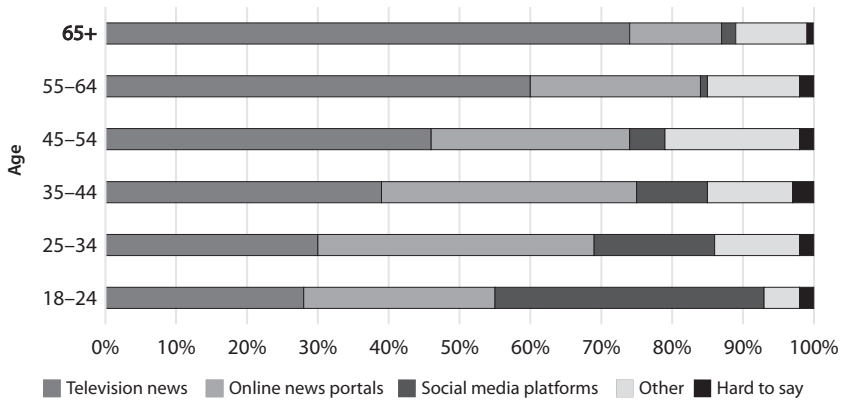


Source: B. Roguska, *Spółeczna percepcja działań rządu od początku jego funkcjonowania* (komunikat z badań nr 91/2024), CBOS, Warsaw 2024, https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2024/K_091_24.PDF, p. 1.

Notably, the relative importance of these sources varied significantly by age: younger respondents were more likely to rely on internet sources and social media for political information, whereas older respondents increasingly preferred television as their primary information channel (figure 2). Television served as the main source of information about government activity for only 28% of respondents aged 18–24, compared to nearly three quarters (74%) among those aged 65 and above. Notably, while individuals aged 25–44 relied primarily on online news portals, the youngest cohort (under 25 years of age) reported social media platforms as their principal source of political information.

These findings illustrate a generational shift in political information consumption, indicating that social media play a particularly central role in shaping

¹¹ B. Roguska, *Spółeczna percepcja działań rządu od początku jego funkcjonowania* (komunikat z badań nr 91/2024), CBOS, Warsaw 2024, https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2024/K_091_24.PDF (9.01.2026).

Figure 2. Sources of information about government activity by age groups

Source: B. Roguska, *Spółeczna percepcja...*, p. 2.

political awareness among younger citizens. This trend has far-reaching consequences for political communication strategies and underscores the necessity of incorporating social-media-oriented competencies into political marketing education.

Other social media factors influencing political marketing

The development of social media has been accompanied by the emergence of new phenomena and dynamics that exert a significant influence on contemporary politics. These changes have transformed the ways in which political actors communicate, mobilize supporters, and construct public images. Accordingly, the following section discusses several additional phenomena associated with the evolution of social media that have had a substantial impact on political marketing.

Direct communication. The expansion of social media platforms has fundamentally reconfigured the mechanisms of political marketing by transforming both the channels and the dynamics of political communication¹². Digital platforms enable political actors to establish direct and continuous contact with citizens, substantially reducing the mediating role traditionally played by mass media institutions¹³. This process of disintermediation allows political messages to be disseminated in real time and with limited editorial intervention, increas-

¹² D. Kreiss, *Prototype Politics: Technology-Intensive Campaigning and the Data of Democracy*, Oxford 2016, pp. 3–15.

¹³ A. Chadwick, *The Hybrid Media System...*, pp. 45–67.

ing message control on the part of political actors while simultaneously accelerating the pace of political communication.

Message and source credibility. Direct communication is often associated with anonymity on the sender's side and difficulty in identifying the actual source of the message, which in turn affects the credibility of the communication.

Permanent communication. Historically, a campaign was limited to the period from the announcement of the elections to the election silence. Nowadays, political campaigning is conducted on a permanent basis¹⁴. This means that politicians' activity on social media is continuous, and campaigns begin long before the elections. Politicians maintain constant activity on social media throughout the electoral cycle, since platforms demand ongoing presence, rapid responses to events, and sustained audience engagement.

Interactive engagement and audience feedback. Social media introduce a model of political engagement based on interactivity and immediacy. Citizens are no longer passive recipients of political messages but active participants in communicative exchanges, providing instant feedback through comments, shares, and reactions¹⁵. From a political marketing perspective, this interactive environment enables continuous monitoring of public sentiment and facilitates rapid strategic adaptation¹⁶. At the same time, such interaction contributes to the construction of perceived proximity, accessibility, and authenticity between political actors and voters¹⁷.

Campaign management. Social media have become a core infrastructure of contemporary political campaigning. Their relatively low costs, extensive reach, and advanced targeting capabilities make them indispensable tools for mobilising supporters, volunteers and coordinating campaign activities¹⁸.

¹⁴ J. Garlicki, *Komunikowanie polityczne – od kampanii wyborczej do kampanii permanentnej*, «Studia Politologiczne» 2010, vol. 16, pp. 26–45.

¹⁵ C. Vaccari, A. Valeriani, *Outside the Bubble: Social Media and Political Participation in Western Democracies*, Oxford 2021, pp. 21–39.

¹⁶ R. Fletcher, R.K. Nielsen, *Democratic Creative Destruction? The Effect of a Changing Media Landscape on Democracy*, [in:] N. Persily, J.A. Tucker (eds), *Social Media and Democracy: The State of the Field, Prospects for Reform*, Cambridge 2020, pp. 139–162.

¹⁷ G. Enli, L.T. Rosenberg, *Trust in the Age of Social Media: Populist Politicians Seem More Authentic*, «Social Media + Society» 2018, vol. 4(1).

¹⁸ R.K. Gibson, *When the Nerds Go Marching In: How Digital Technology Moved from the Margins to the Mainstream of Political Campaigns*, Oxford–New York 2020, pp. 2–24.

Grassroots mobilization. Beyond formal campaign structures, social media platforms facilitate the emergence and coordination of grassroots political mobilisation. Networked forms of collective action, often organised through hashtags, viral content, and digital calls to action, enable rapid mobilisation without the need for traditional organisational resources. Such bottom-up mobilisation challenges established political actors and alters the balance between institutionalised political marketing and citizen-driven political engagement.

Emerging social media phenomena relevant to didactics

The teaching of political marketing should take into account new phenomena emerging with the development of social media. The following section highlights selected phenomena and issues that are key to understanding contemporary political communication.

Algorithmic personalisation. Social media platforms mediate content exposure via opaque algorithms, which organise user feeds according to predicted engagement potential. This has implications for how political messages propagate, how audiences form opinions, and how educators should teach about information environments and media literacy. The algorithmic logic of social media shapes visibility and engagement patterns, which influences political discourse in ways not fully predictable by traditional models. Algorithmic personalisation can reinforce echo chambers, affecting political knowledge distribution and attitudes.

Filter bubbles and confirmation bias. These phenomena relate to a situation in which an internet user receives information selected by algorithms on the basis of data collected about them during their previous online activity. As a result, the user is exposed primarily to information that aligns with their existing views and is not directed toward alternative topics or opposing perspectives. Filter bubbles reinforce confirmation bias and hinder political dialogue¹⁹. Closely related to confirmation bias is group polarization, a phenomenon in which group discussions tend to amplify members' preexisting beliefs and atti-

¹⁹ See for example: S. Flaxman, S. Goel, J.M. Rao, *Filter bubbles, echo chambers, and online news consumption*, «Public Opinion Quarterly» 2016, vol. 80(S1), pp. 298–320; E. Pariser, *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding from You*, New York 2011; L. Harris, P. Harrigan, *Social Media in Politics: The Ultimate Voter Engagement Tool or Simply an Echo Chamber?*, «Journal of Political Marketing» 2015, vol. 14(3), pp. 251–283.

tudes. Confirmation bias itself refers to the tendency to favor information that confirms prior beliefs, expectations, or hypotheses, regardless of its accuracy.

Disinformation, fake news, and deepfakes. Disinformation is one of the most significant threats to democratic processes²⁰. It targets entire populations rather than individual persons. Its objective is to replace specific views held by mass audiences that are deemed unfavorable by the disinformation actor. This phenomenon is closely related to the following issues:

- mechanisms of the spread of fake news,
- the influence of bots and trolls on political narratives,
- deepfakes as a tool in electoral campaigns allowing the creation of realistic but false materials²¹.

Foreign interference. Studies show that bots and trolls influence political narratives, polarization, and public perceptions²². To address the risks of foreign interference in political processes via social media and other digital platforms, the European Union adopted Regulation 2024/900 on the transparency and targeting of political advertising on 13 March 2024²³.

Microtargeting. The emergence of social media platforms has enabled parties to tailor their messages to specific demographic and ideological groups more

²⁰ S. Bradshaw, P.N. Howard, *The Global Disinformation Disorder: 2019 Global Inventory of Organised Social Media Manipulation*, Working Paper. Project on Computational Propaganda, Oxford 2019.

²¹ C. Vaccari, A. Chadwick, *Deepfakes and Disinformation: Exploring the Impact of Synthetic Political Video on Deception, Uncertainty, and Trust in News*, «Social Media + Society» 2020, vol. 6(1); R. Chesney, D.K. Citron, *Deep Fakes: A Looming Challenge for Privacy, Democracy, and National Security*, «California Law Review» 2019, vol. 107, pp. 1753–1819; A. Guess, B. Nyhan, J. Reifler, *Selective Exposure to Misinformation: Evidence from the Consumption of Fake News during the 2016 U.S. Presidential Campaign*, Working Paper. European Research Council, Brussels 2018.

²² See for example: A. Cirone, W. Hobbs, *Asymmetric flooding as a tool for foreign influence on social media*, «Political Science Research and Methods» 2023, 11(1), pp. 160–171; R. Ó Fathaigh, T. Dobber, F. Zuiderveen Borgesius, J. Shires, *Microtargeted propaganda by foreign actors: An interdisciplinary exploration*, «Maastricht Journal of European and Comparative Law» 2021, vol. 28(6), pp. 856–877.

²³ Council of the European Union, *EU introduces new rules on transparency and targeting of political advertising*, Press release, 11.03.2024, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/03/11/eu-introduces-new-rules-on-transparency-and-targeting-of-political-advertising/> (10.01.2026); European Union, *Regulation (EU) 2024/900 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 March 2024 on the transparency and targeting of political advertising*, Official Journal of the European Union, 20.03.2024, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2024/900/oj> (10.01.2026).

precisely, reaching the level commonly referred to as microtargeting²⁴. Microtargeting of political advertising on social media is a powerful tool in the hands of candidates and political parties. It allows tailored advertisements to reach very narrow target groups and to influence the political behavior of voters. The EU Regulation 2024/900 introduces strict limitations on political ad targeting²⁵.

TikTokization, “memetic” politics, and virality. The phenomenon referred to as “instant politics,” the “memification of politics,” and sometimes also the “TikTokization of politics” denotes a transformation of political communication toward highly condensed and simplified forms of expression. TikTokization refers to the shortening of political messages, emotionalization, and the dominance of viral content²⁶. Political messages are increasingly reduced to slogans, memes, or short video formats disseminated via platforms such as TikTok or Instagram Reels, facilitating rapid consumption while simultaneously limiting contextual depth and complexity. Central to this dynamic is viral potential: politicians and political parties deliberately craft messages designed to spread

²⁴ For further discussion of microsegmentation and microtargeting, see, for example: J. Chester, K.C. Montgomery, *The role of digital marketing in political campaigns*, «Internet Policy Review» 2017, vol. 6(4), pp. 1–20; K. Endres, *Targeted issue messages and voting behavior*, «American Politics Research» 2020, vol. 48(2), pp. 317–328; C. Erfort, *Targeting voters online: How parties’ campaigns differ*, «Electoral Studies» 2024, vol. 92, Article 102872; M.M. Franz, *Targeting campaign messages: Good for campaigns but bad for America?*, [in:] T.N. Ridout (ed.), *New Directions in Media and Politics*, London–New York 2013, pp. 113–131; C. Gahn, *How much tailoring is too much? Voter backlash on highly tailored campaign messages*, «Political Communication» 2024, vol. 41(2), pp. 123–145; E.D. Hersh, B.F. Schaffner, *Targeted campaign appeals and the value of ambiguity*, «The Journal of Politics» 2013, vol. 75(2), pp. 520–534; P. Kotler, H. Kartajaya, I. Setiawan, *Marketing 5.0: Technology for Humanity*, Hoboken 2021; S. Kruikemeier, M. Sezgin, S.C. Boerman, *Political microtargeting: Relationship between personalized advertising on Facebook and voters’ responses*, «Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking» 2016, vol. 19(6), pp. 367–372; J. Lees-Marshment, B. Conley, E. Elder, R. Pettitt, V. Raynald, A. Turcotte, *Political Marketing: Principles and Applications*, London–New York 2019; A. Simchon, M. Edwards, S. Lewandowsky, *The persuasive effects of political microtargeting in the age of generative artificial intelligence*, «PNAS Nexus» 2024, vol. 3(2); S. Stuckelberger, J. Koedam, *Parties’ voter targeting strategies: What can Facebook ads tell us?*, «Electoral Studies» 2022, vol. 77, pp. 1–13; B. Zarouali, T. Dobber, G. De Pauw, C. de Vreese, *Using a personality-profiling algorithm to investigate political microtargeting: Assessing the persuasion effects of personality-tailored ads on social media*, «Communication Research» 2022, vol. 49(8), pp. 1066–1091.

²⁵ European Union, *Regulation (EU) 2024/900 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 March 2024 on the transparency and targeting of political advertising*, Official Journal of the European Union, 20.03.2024, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2024/900/oj> (10.01.2026).

²⁶ I. Literat, N. Kligler-Vilenchik, *TikTok as a Key Platform for Youth Political Expression*, «Social Media + Society» 2023, vol. 9(1).

organically across social media networks. This process underscores the growing role of memes in public debate and their influence on how political actors and events are perceived²⁷. At the same time, “instant” politics is associated with a markedly shortened reaction time, as political actors are pressured to respond to unfolding events in real time, often before comprehensive and verified information is available. Consequently, emotional appeal and audience engagement metrics (such as likes and shares) tend to outweigh substantive argumentation and analytical depth in contemporary political communication.

Polarization, (de)mobilization, and negative campaigning. Negative campaigns are aimed not only at reinforcing the loyalty of one’s own voters, but also at demobilizing the electorate of political opponents. Strong polarization contributes to a decline in trust in politicians, with politicians ranked as the profession trusted by the fewest people in the United Kingdom: only 9% of respondents trust politicians to tell the truth, compared with 88% who trust nurses and 87% who trust airline pilots²⁸.

Exposure to uncivil political communication online, particularly from elite actors, triggers strong emotional responses, most notably anger, which in turn shape behavioral and attitudinal outcomes. Incivility increases affective polarization by amplifying partisan hostility, motivates reactive engagement (e.g., sharing, commenting, or retaliating), and fosters antideliberative attitudes that reduce openness to opposing viewpoints²⁹. Overall, elite incivility does not merely provoke mimicry but actively mobilizes partisan supporters while undermining constructive political deliberation³⁰.

Social mobilization and turnout. Social media shape voter mobilization through multiple channels. Politicians can leverage these platforms to encourage supporters to contribute to campaigns, attend events, participate in voting, or engage with specific political initiatives. Voter mobilization is influenced

²⁷ A. Halversen, B.E. Weeks, *Memeing Politics: Understanding Political Meme Creators, Audiences, and Consequences on Social Media*, «Social Media + Society» 2023, vol. 9(4).

²⁸ Ipsos, *Veracity Index 2023: Trust in professions in Britain*, <https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/ipsos-trust-in-professions-veracity-index-2023> (10.01.2026).

²⁹ An alternative view highlighting the positive effects of negative advertising in: J.G. Geer, *In Defense of Negativity: Attack Ads in Presidential Campaigns*, Chicago 2006.

³⁰ See for example the research conducted by B.T. Gervais: B.T. Gervais, *Incivility online: Affective and behavioral reactions to uncivil political posts in web-based experiment*, «Journal of Information Technology & Politics» 2015, vol. 12(2), pp. 167–185; B.T. Gervais, *More than mimicry? The role of anger in uncivil reactions to elite political incivility*, «International Journal of Public Opinion Research» 2017, vol. 20(3), pp. 384–405; B.T. Gervais, *Rousing the partisan combatant: Elite incivility, anger, and antideliberative attitudes*, «Political Psychology» 2019, vol. 40(3), pp. 637–655.

not only by the actions of politicians but also by other social media users. K. Haenschen has demonstrated for instance that Facebook status updates informing users that their friends have voted can subtly increase voter turnout by leveraging social pressure and visible participation norms³¹.

The role of third-party actors. Third-party political ads are often more persuasive and less risky for candidates. Attacks conducted by independent actors are perceived as more credible by voters and generate a weaker backlash effect against the sponsor of the message³². During the 2023 Polish parliamentary campaign, “third” or ostensibly “independent” actors were actively involved in turnout-mobilization and referendum campaigns³³. In part, this constituted indirect support for electoral committees outside official campaign budgets and was carried out without disclosure of the beneficiary or real sponsor of the advertisements.

During the 2025 presidential campaign in Poland, some advertisements supporting Rafał Trzaskowski, broadcast on his official YouTube channel by the agency Fat Frogs Media, did not include the legally required disclosures³⁴. Particular public attention was drawn to the activities of two independent social media communication initiatives, “Wiesz Jak Nie Jest” and “Stół Dorosłych”, which actively intervened in the electoral campaign by promoting Rafał Trzaskowski and simultaneously criticizing his main competitors, Sławomir Mentzen and Karol Nawrocki. Together, the two initiatives spent nearly PLN 500,000 on advertising, with total views surpassing 30 million. Such cases illustrate the broader phenomenon observed in negative third-party campaigning, where ads sponsored by independent actors can generate extensive exposure while mitigating potential backlash for the sponsor candidate themselves.

The impact of AI on political communication. Artificial intelligence enables among others automated campaigning, content generation, sentiment analy-

³¹ K. Haenschen, *Social pressure on social media: Using Facebook status updates to increase voter turnout*, «Journal of Communication» 2016, vol. 66(4), pp. 542–563.

³² G.M. Garramone, *Voter Responses to Negative Political Ads*, «Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly» 1984, vol. 61, pp. 250–259; C.M. Dowling, A. Wichowsky, *Attacks without consequence? Candidates, parties, groups, and the changing face of negative advertising*, «American Journal of Political Science» 2014, vol. 59(1), pp. 19–36; D.L. Painter, *Collateral Damage: Involvement and the Effects of Negative Super PAC Advertising: Involvement and the Effects of Negative Super PAC Advertising*, «American Behavioral Scientist» 2013, vol. 58(4), pp. 510–523.

³³ K. Izdebski (ed.), *Obraz kampanii...*

³⁴ See: K. Izdebski, M. Rudź, A. Winciorek, R. Woźniak, *Od emocji do liczb: Kompleksowy raport z kampanii prezydenckiej 2025 w mediach społecznościowych*, Fundacja im. Stefana Batorego 2025.

sis, and deepfake creation. During the Polish presidential campaign in 2025, candidates' campaign teams used AI-based tools for a variety of purposes, including analyzing voter surveys, monitoring and interpreting online content, and supporting the production of digital campaign materials³⁵.

Political Influencers. Influencers have increasingly emerged as new political intermediaries, reshaping patterns of political communication and mobilisation, particularly among younger citizens. Research indicates that young voters often place greater trust in online content creators than in traditional media outlets, perceiving influencers as more authentic, relatable, and credible sources of information³⁶. Studies further demonstrate that political messages conveyed by social media influencers can significantly increase followers' political action intentions, including engagement, information seeking, and participation³⁷.

The phenomena outlined above are closely linked to the development and use of social media. They often carry multiple potential risks, but there are also positive aspects that should be addressed in political marketing courses. Social media help build the public image (or "brand") of politicians across dimensions such as: credibility and trust, closeness and understanding of people, competence, values, policy agenda and personal traits (e.g., diligence). Social media also facilitate campaign fundraising activities through various means, including direct appeals for donations from the candidate or supporting politicians, social media advertisements using remarketing techniques, linking ads directly to donation websites, and leveraging emotions such as shame or civic duty. They are particularly effective in mobilizing voters by reminding them of election dates, highlighting the importance of the vote and the risk of an opponent's victory, and in engaging and organizing supporters and volunteers.

Implications for political marketing didactics

Recent research highlights that the integration of social media into political marketing education enhances student engagement, practical skills, and

³⁵ Personal conversations with members of campaign staff of selected candidates in the 2025 presidential elections.

³⁶ M.J. Riedl, J. Lukito, S.C. Woolley, *Political Influencers on Social Media: An Introduction*, «Social Media + Society» 2023, vol. 9(2); C. Peter, L. Muth, *Social media influencers' role in shaping political opinions and actions of young audiences*, «Media and Communication» 2023, vol. 11(3), pp. 164–174.

³⁷ H. Reinikainen, N.S. Borchers, A. Suuronen, K. Strandberg, *Lighting the participatory spark? The role of social media influencers in initiating political participation*, «Nordicom Review» 2025, vol. 46(1), pp. 25–54; C. Peter, L. Muth, *Social media influencers...*

critical literacy. Sweet-Cushman has demonstrated that using platforms such as Twitter fosters active participation in civic dialogue and deepens understanding of real-world political communication³⁸. Project-based exercises, including designing and analyzing digital campaigns, improve strategic thinking, audience targeting, and data-driven decision-making³⁹. Additionally, critical media literacy training equips students to identify misinformation, evaluate source credibility, and understand persuasive strategies employed in social media campaigns⁴⁰. Finally, Intyaswati et al. have shown that social media can serve as an effective learning environment for political knowledge and campaign simulation, enhancing students' ability to apply theoretical concepts in practical contexts⁴¹. Collectively, these findings underscore the importance of interactive, practice-oriented pedagogies in political marketing curricula. Changes in the teaching of political marketing concern both the content of courses, the examples discussed in class, the assignments and projects completed by students, as well as the skills that should be developed.

Developing digital competencies and critical thinking skills

Integrating media literacy into political marketing courses increases students' resistance to disinformation. It also strengthens students' ability to critically assess digital content, recognize persuasive techniques, and understand the broader socio-political implications of "platformized" communication. During the political marketing course, students should learn to:

- Identify manipulation techniques,
- Analyze sources critically,
- Evaluate content credibility,
- Understand algorithmic biases,
- Recognize emotional and affective strategies in digital messaging.

These competencies are essential for navigating "platformized" political communication and for responsibly engaging in digital public spheres.

³⁸ J. Sweet-Cushman, *Social Media Learning as a Pedagogical Tool: Twitter and Engagement in Civic Dialogue and Public Policy*, «Political Science & Politics» 2019, vol. 52(4), pp. 763–770.

³⁹ A. Pastuhov, A. Sivenius, *Educating for political campaigning on social media via enhancing technical expertise: An analysis of the candidate education practices in a Finnish conservative-liberal party*, «Studies in the Education of Adults» 2024, pp. 1–19.

⁴⁰ R.T. Knowles, S. Camicia, L. Nelson, *Education for Democracy in the Social Media Century*, «Research in Social Sciences and Technology» 2023, vol. 8(2), pp. 21–36.

⁴¹ D. Intyaswati, E. Maryani, D. Sugiana, A. Venus, *Social Media as an Information Source of Political Learning in Online Education*, «SAGE Open» 2021, vol. 11(2).

Updating curriculum content

The rapid evolution of social media challenges traditional political marketing curricula. Courses that focus predominantly on broadcast media and traditional campaign advertising do not equip students with the competencies necessary for analysing digital ecosystems. Didactics must evolve from traditional, theory-heavy approaches toward dynamic, practice-oriented, and digitally informed models of instruction. Updating curricula also requires replacing outdated examples (e.g., TV-centered campaigns) with contemporary case studies that illustrate platform dynamics, virality, and data-driven strategies. Curricula should integrate new thematic areas that reflect the realities of digital campaigning. These include among others:

- Digital analytics and platform metrics literacy: understanding reach, engagement, algorithms and performance indicators,
- Digital advertising ecosystems, including Meta Ads Library and Google Ads transparency tools,
- Critical media literacy, disinformation ecosystems and fact-checking practices: evaluating credibility, bias, and misinformation in digital content,
- AI-generated content, including synthetic images, videos, voice, and text,
- Microtargeting and regulatory frameworks,
- Influencer politics, which increasingly mediate political communication,
- Ethical reasoning: addressing privacy concerns, targeting norms and normative questions around persuasion and autonomy.
- Finally, didactics should become more interdisciplinary, drawing from communication studies, data science, psychology, and media literacy.

An analysis of the content of current syllabi for the course “political marketing” and related subjects from Polish higher education institutions over the past few years shows that social media topics appear to a very limited extent. Only in two out of the seven analyzed syllabi from different universities did a topic related to digital or internet marketing/campaign appear⁴². Moreover, in both cases, this topic was covered in just a single class session during the entire semester of the course.

Lecturers who teach courses such as political marketing or political communication currently face a significant challenge in accommodating the discussion of all important new phenomena related to social media within the syllabus of these classes. Alongside new developments, there are also established topics that

⁴² The analysis included syllabi from the following Polish universities: University of Łódź, Jagiellonian University in Cracow, University of Warsaw, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Kazimierz Wielki University in Bydgoszcz, Poznań University of Economics, and University of Rzeszów.

still need to be covered during class time. One possible solution to this didactic challenge is the introduction of a new course entitled “social media in politics” or similarly⁴³. This would allow most of the new phenomena associated with social media to be discussed within a full, stand-alone course, thereby relieving political marketing classes of the burden of addressing many additional key issues.

Updating teaching methods and tools

Teaching political marketing with an emphasis on social media requires balancing technical training with critical reflection. Students need to acquire practical skills such as content creation, platform management, and data analysis, while also understanding how digital communication shapes political influence, persuasion, and public opinion. This combination is essential for preparing students to function effectively and responsibly in contemporary political communication environments.

Current pedagogical approaches increasingly emphasize experiential and project-based learning. Real-world assignments, campaign simulations, and cross-platform analytics projects allow students to apply theoretical knowledge in practical settings⁴⁴. Courses that include social media brand building and strategic content planning help develop core competencies in digital political marketing. At the same time, working with analytics data encourages students to critically interpret audience behavior and assess campaign performance.

Research in marketing and social media education confirms the value of project-based learning. Studies show that such methods increase student engagement, motivation, and the practical application of skills related to digital campaign planning and execution. Compared with traditional lecture-based instruction, project-oriented formats promote more active participation and lead to improved learning outcomes⁴⁵.

Finally, the use of comparative case studies further strengthens political marketing education. Analysing election campaigns from different countries

⁴³ Such a course was introduced at the University of Warsaw in the 2024/2025 academic year.

⁴⁴ D.A. Kolb, R.E. Boyatzis, C. Mainemelis, *Experiential learning theory: Previous research and new directions*, [in:] R.J. Sternberg, L.-F. Zhang (eds.), *Perspectives on Thinking, Learning, and Cognitive Styles*, Mahwah 2001, pp. 227–247; C. Wymbs, *Digital Marketing: The Time for a New “Academic Major” Has Arrived*, «Journal of Marketing Education» 2011, vol. 33(1), pp. 93–106.

⁴⁵ S. Demirci, K.-Y. Lee, A.M. Binamak, *Marketing Education through PBL: A Case of Social Media Influencer Marketing*, «Engineering Proceedings» 2023, vol. 38(1).

enables students to examine diverse strategies and to understand how platform features, cultural norms, and political systems interact. This approach supports a deeper and more nuanced understanding of contemporary political communication.

Below are selected, exemplary new teaching techniques and tools to be used in political marketing courses:

- Case studies of recent campaigns, focusing on platform strategies, in which students are asked to address questions such as: Why should a particular social media platform be chosen over others? Who is the target audience? What is the main message, and were certain messages better adapted to specific social media formats?
- Analysis of political ads (spending, targeting, and messaging) using transparency libraries, such as Meta Ad Library,
- Analysis of posts, negative advertisements, and politicians' comments – style, language, and manipulation techniques,
- Project based learning, where students design digital campaign components, such as for instance: YouTube video / advertisement, TikTok video, political memes, Facebook / Instagram post, tweets, campaign website, infographic presenting a specific policy proposal,
- Campaign simulations, enabling students to test strategies in controlled environments,
- The use of digital trend-monitoring and analytics tools to track issue salience and public attention, such as Google Trends and other platforms for identifying emerging topics and shifts in audience interest,
- The use of social media analytics and monitoring tools to examine engagement patterns, interaction dynamics, and the dissemination of political content across platforms, including X and comparable services,
- AI based tools for content generation and sentiment analysis,
- Creation of social media materials during the course, including for example: political profiles, negative advertisements, political memes, and short-form video content,
- Debates on platform regulation and AI,
- Project-based assessment instead of traditional exams.

Conclusions

The integration of social media into political marketing education reflects the broader transformation of communication ecosystems. Traditional didactic models are insufficient for preparing students to analyse algorithmic environ-

ments, interactive audiences, and platform-specific dynamics. These skills are not traditionally covered in classical political marketing syllabi. Teaching must prepare students for challenges related to disinformation, polarization, AI, thus providing students with a “vaccine” as protection against political influence.

Curricula must evolve to balance theoretical foundations with practical skills, critical reflection, and ethical understanding. More material is being added, rather than reduced, to teaching, because television, radio, and the press still need to be covered, and in addition new social media platforms and related phenomena are developing. New courses, such as for instance “social media in politics”, are essential for addressing digital phenomena in depth. In the absence of a dedicated course on social media in politics, the political marketing curriculum should be supplemented with contemporary phenomena. A review of syllabi from selected Polish universities indicates a significant educational gap in this area.

Constantly evolving practices require continuous curriculum updating, as platforms, regulations, and campaign practices change rapidly. Political science didactics must be flexible, interdisciplinary, and practice-oriented to prepare students for the realities of “platformized” politics. This requires institutional support for ongoing professional development and pedagogical experimentation.

Educators are encouraged to adopt a case study approach and project-based learning, allowing students to experiment with tools, platforms, and analytical methods. Assessment models can be adapted to prioritize projects, simulations, and analytical tasks over traditional exams. Digital ethics should be incorporated to help students understand the implications of AI, data collection, and algorithmic governance.

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