

## **Online Campaigning Training Module**

### **Introduction**

Over the past five years the growth of the internet has had a lasting impact on most people's private and professional lives, and certainly on the public debate and the political arena. Political parties already had websites where everyone could read the party's views – but they usually left it at that, and it used to be enough. This is no longer the case. People have developed new ways of acquiring information, and the way their choices and decisions are influenced by these new media has undergone dramatic changes. People are no longer in awe of authority, brand names and institutions the way they used to be. Their loyalties are weaker and shift more easily, which complicates the job of organizing membership drives, fund-raising, opinion-moulding and maintaining customer relations. Increasingly, consumers and voters vent their own opinions, argue back and mobilize themselves. Political parties have to find modern ways to deal with this. This course module aims to provide a few pointers.

### **AMS**

Social media played an important part in the recent uprisings in Northern Africa. AMS intends to expand its activities in that region. This is one more reason – in addition to the developments mentioned in the previous paragraph – why it's important to offer a more elaborate training module on campaigning. In our courses we experience first-hand how rapidly internet access has spread in all the countries where AMS has traditionally provided campaign training. Increasingly, we see that course participants are fully abreast of the latest campaigning trends in Europe or the US. And more importantly, internet and social media already play a crucial role in the public debate and the mobilization of public support in a large number of the countries served by AMS. That's why it is important that course instructors inform themselves about the role of the internet in the local political arena, even if the course they teach is not about online campaigning. On the other hand it should also be stressed that even if course participants are much more active in the social media than their instructor, this should not be mistaken for proof of their proficiency in effective online campaigning – so it certainly doesn't invalidate your role as course instructor.

After all, AMS course instructors are not expected to be experts in the theory of political campaigning; similarly, they are not required to be able to advise the course participants about the latest technological gadgetry. The sole purpose of the Online Campaigning Module is to make participants aware of the role the internet plays in contemporary society and the consequences this has for political communication, and to make them think about and develop ways to implement this in their own party or organization.

### **Starting point**

To start with, it is important to state that online communication is not a substitute for activities we have always engaged in, either individually or as organizations. It is an addition to what we always did. We still buy our bread at the baker's and we still phone a journalist to inquire about a newspaper article. On the other hand, organizations can no longer afford to treat online reality as an isolated issue of minor importance. Determining the campaign's strategy, central message and target groups first, and then adapting them for the internet as an afterthought must be characterized as a losing strategy. The distinction between life online and life in the real world is nothing if not artificial; the two worlds co-exist and every step you take online has to be fully integrated in the entire campaign.

Remember that this module is intended as an addition to the 'traditional' AMS modules and the

entire AMS method. So do not hesitate to rely on your own knowledge and to add material and exercises from other modules, adapting it to the theme of online campaigning where necessary. SWOT, Central Message, Means, Target Groups, Campaign Organization, Managing Volunteers, Recruitment and Fund-raising: all these modules in the AMS Manual have acquired an online dimension by now. Whenever you give a course on any one of these subjects, this module may help you to flesh out their online component.

#### Example 1: Target groups

This component encourages the participants to give their campaign a clear focus and to make their message more specific. It is easy to link this to online activities: where are those target groups, who are they, how can they be reached online? What are the key issues and the main themes, what type of content do they respond to? Which other organizations are working on those themes, and how can you find them and initiate business relations?

#### Example 2: SWOT

If there is any one part of the course programme which combines knowledge transfer, collaboration methods and information gathering about country and party (all providing further input for the course), it's the SWOT analysis. Performing a SWOT analysis is crucial for any organization that wants to mount a campaign. So it makes sense to include this in a training course about Online Campaigning. The analysis can be focused on typical internet features: what are the strengths and weaknesses, the opportunities and threats facing the party with regard to online communication?

#### **Local circumstances**

It is always hard to gauge the level of your participants' knowledge beforehand. Especially in the Online Campaigning Module their knowledge may vary widely, which will affect the course targets. This requires some flexibility on the part of the instructor. Always be aware that the strategy-oriented training you had planned might have to be adjusted on the spot to a more basic demonstration along the lines of: 'How does Twitter work?' (In this case, revert to the traditional modules, with an online component.)

Then there is the ever-present threat of technological breakdowns. In a training course about online campaigning a good internet connection is indispensable, as is the availability of a sufficient number of laptops for the group to work with. But even if all this has been arranged with the local organization beforehand, things can always go wrong at the last minute. This can seriously disrupt the course programme and the planned exercises, so make sure you always have a plan B (i.e. reverting to the traditional modules with an online component).

Finally, there is the security aspect of expressing yourself online. This is definitely something to keep in mind. It is often wiser for the instructor not to commit publicly to certain political views; participants on their part may not be prepared to publicly express their views of a local party. It is important always to discuss this at the outset.

#### **The programme**

If you weren't planning to do so already: be flexible and use additional, existing AMS training modules wherever appropriate. Schedule extra time for further discussion of specific aspects if necessary. The PowerPoint presentation consists of the following specific online programme parts.

#### ***Changing media landscape***

In the early days of mass communication, the media world was nice and tidy; today it is best

described as chaos. In the old days, organizations had it easy. If you had an announcement, you needed an intermediary to broadcast it to the public. The media were that intermediary. You could also buy advertising space, or write a press release (adhering to a number of rules described in a chapter of our manual) and hope some reporter would pick it up, turn it into a story and thereby spread your message. It was a stab in the dark because you never knew who would read it or watch it.

Those options are still available, but there are new ones marginalizing the intermediary role of journalists: anyone can publish and anyone can communicate directly with the public. This goes for individuals communicating with organizations as well as the other way around. Political parties can now communicate directly and publicly with their voters. The only thing is: the voters respond, and so do other organizations, and other websites. News is no longer one article in the paper or on a website, or one item in a news bulletin; news is a running conversation between various people at various times and in various places, while new elements are added all the time.

### ***In-house news services***

If your party wants to run its own news services, you should make sure that it's relevant to the ongoing conversations. You may think something is important, but if it's not relevant in any way to what other people regard as important, it's no good. Your news should be current and relevant. This involves two components; one deals with content, the other with practical aspects. In terms of content, parties and politicians should be constantly aware of what is going on and what people are thinking about. This way they can put their added value into play. It's important to throw a social-democratic light on current issues, instead of just broadcasting the social-democratic message.

In a practical sense, technical and editorial demands are made of a party's own news services. Since we no longer depend on journalists and are able to publish things ourselves, much more news can be broadcast. It's not only press-worthy items that are 'news' and deserve to be on the website; smaller or more trivial issues can also be included: events, responses to a column, a photo report of a day in Parliament, videos of the youth organization, and so forth.

In addition, a conversation is a different kind of social intercourse: people expect personal contact. So a website should be personalized (show the author's name with each article) and have a much more personal tone. It should also be literally linked to the conversation. This means adding links to external sources, but also to earlier articles written by the party on the same subject. When you link, others will link to you too. Online news services always refer directly to the source. This enables you to call attention to your own story, even if there is negative publicity about you. Also, the more often you are linked by others, the higher your Google ranking.

### ***Possible group exercises***

- Find 3 examples of organizations in your country that meet the requirements for a modern website as outlined above;
- Make a list of 10 sites relevant to your organization because they write about the same issues or because they offer opportunities for further broadcasting of your organization's news;
- Pick a recent theme from within your organization and look for breeding grounds to which you can contribute (opinions, current affairs, current conversations elsewhere);
- Write a blog post that meets the requirements (or if appropriate: open your own blog page, for example on Blogger)

If you want to spend more time working on the participants' writing skills, use the sheets on blogging included in the PowerPoint presentation.

### ***Newsletters***

Before you move on to social media, it may be useful to talk about newsletters first. Barack Obama became powerful thanks to his newsletters (plus some other qualities, ☺). People subscribing to a newsletter are similar to people taking out a subscription to a magazine. All too often, however, a newsletter is used as an organization's noticeboard. The advice for newsletters, even more strongly than for a website, is this: put the emphasis on what the subscribers want to read, not on what the party wants to publish. Proper newsletter systems offer all sorts of tools to produce tailor-made news. For example, you can add content to a general newsletter that is only visible to certain target groups, such as the residents of a particular town, all people under 25, women, etc. Another tool measures which content is most interesting to the readers.

### ***Social media***

Social media can filter the abundance of news as described above. They enable us to decide what is interesting, good, bad, funny or relevant. By following friends on Facebook or Twitter, by following organizations we find interesting, and by following accounts that are known for offering expertise, opinions or news in a specific area, we can automatically access the issues closest to our hearts, whether they are about local politics, disturbances in the Middle East, the latest football transfer or horse-riding. This makes platforms like Twitter and Facebook (and possibly similar local ones) obvious channels for distributing your party messages and news services. The stronger your link with current discussions, the bigger the chance that third parties will join in, respond or share, thus creating a wider scope for you.

In addition to their distributional function, social media also have a logical conversation function. When you talk, people will respond. This calls for a form of monitoring to gain insight into what is said about you and to you, and what people say about 'your' issues. You need to set up a structure within your organization that gives someone the mandate to respond quickly on behalf of the party, and also to keep the party leaders informed. Call it *Rapid Response 2.0*.

Another thing social media can do is bring about change. This was evident during the uprisings in Northern Africa. People get organized in groups, sometimes very briefly and focused on one specific issue, after which the community disbands. Again we see temporary loyalties which can be very intensive, but also very short-lived. Crowd sourcing and co-creation are terms used for things or events that were created by the input and control of the public, following a set of rules determined by that same public. Examples of this are Wikipedia and harassmap.org. Usually the effort of a small group creates something that benefits a much larger group.

### ***In your training sessions***

It's important for the trainer to know which platforms are popular. Are Facebook and Twitter really used? Is there a local variety, such as Hyves in the Netherlands? Then you can discuss the basic characteristics of Twitter and/or Facebook with a live demonstration (if you have an internet connection), geared to the specific the knowledge level of your participants.

### ***Suggested exercises***

- Create a Facebook page and/or Twitter page
- Twitter test: find three good and three bad tweets in groups, mix and discuss, have a plenary vote

- Create a hash tag you can use for a specific activity in the near future
- Return to the news item discussed previously and work out how to broadcast it using social media
- Find organizations whose social media profile looks excellent
- Make a list of relevant Tweeters (journalists, influencers, advocates for a cause)

### ***Levels of commitment***

Due to the abundant flow of information and news, it is now attention that is scarce rather than the information itself. So it's crucially important for your organization to secure public attention as soon as you get it. How do you keep the threshold low and enable people to contribute to your party? Most political parties have one main message: join us. Proposing membership like that is just about the most complicated move there is. There are many other levels of commitment besides membership or voluntary work for a political party. Online communication enables you to facilitate all those levels: Twitter for those who are interested in politics in general, a LinkedIn-group for volunteers, etc.

### ***Suggested exercises***

- Make an overview of the ways in which you currently enable people to contribute (role of trainer: point out the gaps and discuss solutions)
- Which kinds of commitment would be interesting, and what do you have to offer as an organization?

### ***Online politician***

What does all this mean for politicians who want to manifest themselves online? Are they all supposed to start Twittering? Should they share their private affairs or stay focused on their message? This is an issue that fits in well with the AMS module on leadership. What do we look for in a leader? Which profile goes with which online behaviour? Which good and bad examples do we know? How can our organization coach politicians in this matter and prevent mistakes? This issue can be discussed in plenary meetings.

### ***Suggested exercises***

- What do you look for in a politician? Get the group to list a number of characteristics. Divide them into subgroups and look for (inter)national examples that fit the bill
- Focus on your own leader and today's current affairs and come up with a social media strategy for him or her