Marketing of Political Parties on Social Media

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Abstract

The aim of this research is to analyze how political parties use social networks for the political marketing of their respective parties. This phenomenon has been practiced specifically in United Stated of America for many years since 2008 when Barack Obama, the President Candidate of Democratic Party started using widely social media platforms. On the other hand, this phenomenon is new in Albania.

This research paper will be focused mainly on the political marketing campaign on social media platforms of Albania Socialist Party of Albania in 2013. 2013 Campaign was a total success and Socialist Party came to power after eight years through a big victory. Case of RILINDJE.net revealed the power of social networks and their importance in communicating with audiences.

This research is based on the case abovementioned and the methodology in conducting is based on analyzing this case and the data obtained from it. Afterward, based on analysis extracted from the collected data authors provide suggestions for further studies regarding this topic.

Keywords: Political Marketing, Socialist Party, Social Network, Rilindje.net

Introduction

Nowadays the development of technology has become crucial in gaining competitive advantage. Especially changes that have occurred in the field of communication show us clearly the importance in adapting to new tools and software programs. The main catalyst of today`s change is without doubt internet. When compared to other means of communication internet is preferred mainly due to opportunities it offers such us; enabling the distribution of the message to a wide audience (Katz, 2003: 97) and providing interactive communication (Sterne, 2010). As a result of the prevalence of internet, it has become possible to create strong brands altogether with shaping the dimensions of customer relationship management (Dalton and Croft, 2003: 204). One of the most crucial parts of communication process is without doubt the channels and the means used to perform it. As a result of development and prospect there is a raising trend in using social media platforms as communication channel.

2. Usage of Social Media in Political Campaigns

2.1. Social Media Platforms

Social media platforms shortly can be described as web sites that provide online interactive communication to people (O'Leary et al., 2011: 2; Orsburn, 2012: 3). Moreover, social media platforms are web sites and applications (Del Giudicevd., 2014: 4) which connect people (Scott andJacka,2011: 5), are used to deliver information to wide audiences via internet (ReindersandFreijsen, 2012: 42), make possible the sharing of ideas (White,2012: 9), and which comprise virtual worlds, social news, social bookmarking, wikis, forums (Tuten, 2008: 19). People now have the possibility to connect, share their views with each other, and establish interactive communication thanks to social media platforms (Zhao et al., 2011: 1; Safko, 2012: 5; Sherman ve Smith, 2013:20). Social media platforms are an important communication and marketing channel (Funk, 2011: 18) that has affected communication strategies radically due to opportunity of spreading messages to big audiences (Scott andJacka, 2011: 3).Botha et al., (2011) in their study found that social media platforms are an important communication channel, and it is very risky for companies (especially brands) not to be part of it. On the other hand, Laroche et al., (2013) found that usage of social media platforms results in the augmentation of loyal customer portfolio. Every organization must firstly identify the social media platforms their audience is using (Brito, 2012: 173).

Table: 2.1.1. Social Media Platforms

Social Media Platforms	Source
Blogs	Zarella, 2010: 3; O'leary, 2011; Sterne, 2010; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Parker, 2010
Microblogs	Zarella, 2010: 3; Parker, 2010; O'leary, 2011; Sterne, 2010
Social Networks	Zarella, 2010: 3; O'leary, 2011; Sterne, 2010; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Parker, 2010
Photo and Video sharing platforms	Zarella, 2010: 3; O'leary, 2011; Sterne, 2010; Parker, 2010
Sosyal bookmarking	Zarella, 2010: 3; Sterne, 2010; Parker, 2010

Virtual World	Zarella, 2010: 3; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010
Social News	Zarella, 2010: 3; O'leary, 2011
Forums	O'leary, 2011; Sterne, 2010
Opinion sharing	Sterne, 2010; Parker, 2010
Collaborative projects (Wikis)	Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Parker, 2010
Virtual Games	Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010

While using social media organizations should consider some important guidelines in order to maintain a healthy communication with the audience. Some of these guidelines can be summarized as follows (Turner and Shah, 2011: 259-262; Reece, 2010: 238):

- Respecting people`s views and values
- Being careful while using materials that belong to other individuals (or institutions) which are protected by copyright law
- Being careful not to reflect on social media issues that should stay inside the company
- Employees should be careful not to publish on social media information that put organization in an uncomfortable situation
- Organizations should be transparent
- Organizations should not create situations that can lead to debates with the audience
- Shared information should be based on real sources
- Shared information should contain the truth

2.2. Proper usage of Social Media Platforms

Advantages and disadvantages of social media platforms are another important topic to be considered. Using social media properly is strongly related with the understanding of its strongest and weakest points. As stated below (Table 2.1.1.) social media platforms have many advantages and disadvantages. Organizations should benefit from their advantages but on the other hand they should be very careful and take seriously in consideration the disadvantages of social media platforms.

Table: 2.1.1. Some advantages and disadvantages of social media

Advantages	Dizadvantages
The main advantage of social media platforms: Providing communication of individuals with each other (Hansen et al., 2011: 12).	Personal information can be viewed from other (De Jong, 2014:18)
For companies: Interactive, contemporary and low cost communication with customers (Funk, 2011: 4).	The risk of stolen personal information (E. Brown, 2010: 102)
Raising brand awareness and building positive perception on brand (Scott and Jacka,2011: 36)	Evaluating people according to Facebook friend number, and Twitter follower numbers; which results in a dual personality (Lovink, 2011: 44)
Social media helps find and recruiting skilled employee (Scott and Jacka,2011: 36)	Time consuming and adictivity (Watkins, 2009: 136, 142; Funk, 2011: 193)

For instance, in France and countries in which French is spoken, the use of Skyrock is very common. While in Brasil and India Orkut is the most preferred social media platform, in Japan Mixi is on the top (R. Brown, 2009: 165). According to observations and researches made in Albania through television, social networks, and socialbakers.com data it can be said that Facebook, Twitter, YouTube have the highest usage rate compared to other social media platforms.

Facebook: Founded by Mark Zuckerbergin 2004 with the aim of establishing connection among old friends (Weinberg, 2009:11; Del Giudicevd., 2014: 2; Tuten, 2008:37) Facebook is the worlds` biggest social network (Deckers and Lacy, 2010: 108) with around 1, 28billion users (Goelmay, 2014). Simply said; if Facebook would be a country, it would have the third biggest population number after China and India (Halloran andThies, 2012; Orsburn, 2012: 5). Albanian politicians and political parties use Facebook widely to communicate with their audiences. Table below shows the number of fans of biggest political parties in Albania and leaders.

Table: 2.1.2. Facebook usage statistics

Facebook page	Total fan number	Local fans

Edi Rama (Prime Minister)	874.501	487.546
Lulzim Basha (Oposition Leader)	547.533	313.996
Socialist Party	167.446	125.969
Democratic Party	303.010	184.614
Erjon Veliaj (Major of Tirana, SP)	242.919	181.719
Rilindje.net	71.926	53.528

Source: socialbakers.com

Twitter: Founded by Jack Dorsey, Noah Glass, Evan Williams and Biz Stone in 2006 (Safko, 2012: 39), Twitter is a social media platform used to deliver short messages to followers (White, 2012: 98)and due to its characteristic of limiting the number of characters used in messages to 140 it is classified as microblog(Del Giudiceet al., 2014: 4). Table below shows some statistics of Twitter usage in Albania.

Table: 2.1.2. Twitter usage statistics

Twitter Profile	Followers	Following	Tweets
Edi Rama (Prime Minister)	181.777	284	4.594
Elvana Gjata (Singer)	129.682	53	3.528
Albanian Football Federation (FSHF)	12.065	18	1.957
Vodafone Albania	11.625	230	1.015

Source: socialbakers.com

YouTube: You Tube is a video sharing platform (Safko, 2010: 532) founded in 2005 and bought in 2006 by Google(Parker, 2010: 232) for $1,65 billion (Tang et al., 2012: 45) and is among the most visited web sites in the world (Halligan and Shah, 2010: 116).You Tube has shaped the communication of institutions. Nowadays many marketing activities are being placed on You Tube (Zarella, 2010: 83). For instance, there are many video published by

companies in which can be found instructions regarding product usage (R. Brown, 2009: 164). Table below shows some statistics of You Tube usage in Albania.

Table: 2.1.2. YouTube usage statistics

YouTube Channel	Subscribers	Videos	Total views
RTV KLAN (Television)	**74 300**	**12 234**	**98 694 239**
TopChannelAlbania (Television)	**131 093**	**22 290**	**88 071 332**
Albeu.com (News Portal)	**514**	**189**	**1 799 262**

2.3. 2008 Presidential Canmpaign of Barac Obama

Usage of social media in political campaigns from President Obama in 2008 is considered to be the breaking point of social media platforms usage in political campaigns (Towner and Dulio, 2012; Zavattaroa, 2010).Qualman (2009) in his book claims that television was the main communication channel that affected positively the presidential campaign of John F. Keneddy. On the other hand, for Barack Obama presidential campaign in 2008 the main communication medium which made the difference was social media (Qualman, 2009: 61). During the presidential campaign, Barack Obama was a senator. Compared to Hillary Clinton and her campaign based on direct marketing activities (e-mail lists, television, radio) with no concerns on budget, Barac Obama obviously was not the favorite candidate to become the US President.

Obama team chooses a different path and decided to lean on social media platforms. They managed to engage many people in this campaign through e-mail, Facebook and MyBarackObama.com web site (Halligan and Shah, 2010: 7-8). Online donation was the most innovative step of this campaign. Some statistics regarding Obama 2008 Presidential campaign are as follows (Brito, 2012: 185-186):

- 6, 5 million donations
- More than $500 million gathered
- 6 million of dobations were higher than $ 100.
- Online donation average was $80.
- "Obama for America" internet campaign obtained 13 million e-mails
- More than 400.000 blogs wrote on the topic (Obama Presidential campaign)

- More than 200.000 events took place

- More than 45.000 volunteers thanks to social media platforms

- One day previous to elections, Obama supporters made more than 3 millio calls to the voters

- 3, 1 million contributors and 6 million volunteers (Cogburn and Vasquez, 2011)

Especially young voters were affected positively by usage of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube (Qualman, 2009: 241; E. Brown, 2010: 9). President Obama currently is using social media very effectively, especially Facebook and Twitter.

Campaign of President Obama in 2008 made Ad Age Magazine choose him as Marketer of The Year. This campaign was found to be very successful and passed other nominees such us Apple and Zappos (Kiley, 2008).

2. 4. Monitoring Social Media

Scales are important in measuring the success of activities. In order to follow and monitor social media, there are many scales and applications. Scales such as hashtags (#), keywords, coding, bookmarks (Crowe, 2012: 105) and many web metrics developed to monitor web platforms have their importance in providing useful information (R. Jamison and S. Jamison, 2011: 137). Since social media metrics focus mainly on perceptions (Funk, 2011: 88) the question marks on return in investments remain still (R. Jamison ve S. Jamison, 2011: 145).Finding a direct relationship among investments on social media activities and their return on investment is the biggest challenge of companies (O'Leary et al., 2011: 134). Also companies not engaging properly on social media platforms risk of losing their loyal customers (R. Jamison and S. Jamison, 2011: 147).Table: 2.4.1. offers an overview of social media metrics used to monitor social media platforms. Also for further detailed information on social media metrics Scott and Jacka(2011: 139) can be checked.

Table: 2.4.1. Scales used inSocial media monitoring

Blogs	-Subscribers -RSS clicks -Comments -Technoratti datas

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	-Visitor number -Sharing on social bookmarking sites such us Digg, Stumbleupon
Forums	-Registration number -New registration -Daily sharing activities -Page views -Total members
Twitter	-Follower number -Talking trends -Retweet number
Virtual worlds	-Users number
Facebook	-Page likes -Comments and Like number -Monthly new friends / monthly deleted friends number -Sharing quality and interactive conversation
YouTube	-Views -Subscribers number -Comments -Like number (for videos)

Photo sharing platfortms	-Comments -Views -Rating
LinkedIn	-Connections -Activity range and participation
Website	-Visitors number -Time passed in the web site

Source: This table was prepared by the authors with sources obtained from: E. Brown, 2010: 21-22; Carter, 2012: 179-180; O'Leary vd., 2011: 137; Funk, 2011: 29; Brito, 2012: 113-119; Sweeney and Craig, 2011: 84.
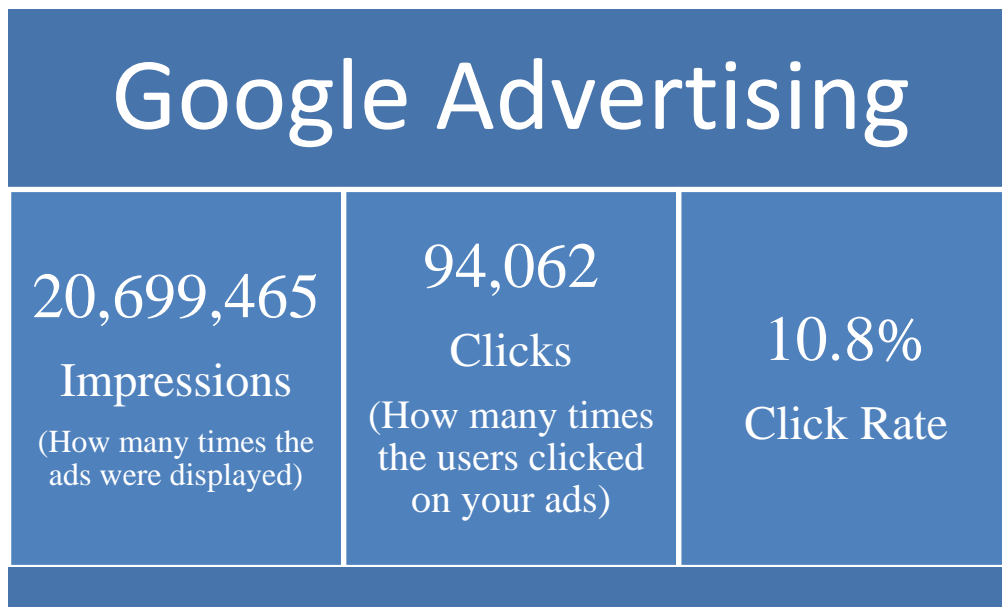
3. Data Methodology and Analysis

To conduct this study data obtained from Rilindje.net administrators was used. This study is based on the successful case of Rilindje.net, thus revealing the importance of social media platforms usage in political campaigns.

Albanian Socialist Party 2013 General Elections Campaign and Social Media

Considering the activities of political parties in Albania it can be said that the first political party which began using other sources than conventional ones was the Albanian Socialist Party and it s head, Edi Rama who at the same time was the mayor of Tirana. Edi Rama started using Twitter to share with the audience his opinion about the politics and applications implemented by Democratic Party, the leading political party between 2005 and 2013. After Twitter, Edi Rama started to use Facebook. The Facebook page went from 150,000 fans in November 2012 to 383,000 fans in the end of June 2013; every day by 3484 fans, every week by 14,635 fans, and every month by 40,800 fans (Bankers, 2013).

Considering 2013 General Election Campaign of Albanian Socialist Party it can be said that usage of social media platform have been quite considerable. Figure 1 shows Google advertising data.

Figure 1: Google Advertising Data

Google Advertising

20,699,465	94,062	10.8%
Impressions	Clicks	Click Rate
(How many times the ads were displayed)	(How many times the users clicked on your ads)	

Source: General Digital Campaign Report 201

Figure 2: Newsletters Data

Newsletters

283.459	35.553	8.301
E-mails sent	Unique opens	Clicks

Source: General Digital Campaign Report 2013

Together with Google ads and newsletters, Facebook advertising was another important tool used by Albanian Socialist Party (Fuga, 2015).

Figure 3: Facebook Advertising

Facebook Advertising

- 998.696.207 Impressions (How many times the ads were displayed
- 1.876.328 Clicks (How many times the users clicked on your ads)
- 325.979 Page Likes (Number of likes gathered from the users)
- 8.549.922 Actions (Number of actions made by the users clicked on the ads)
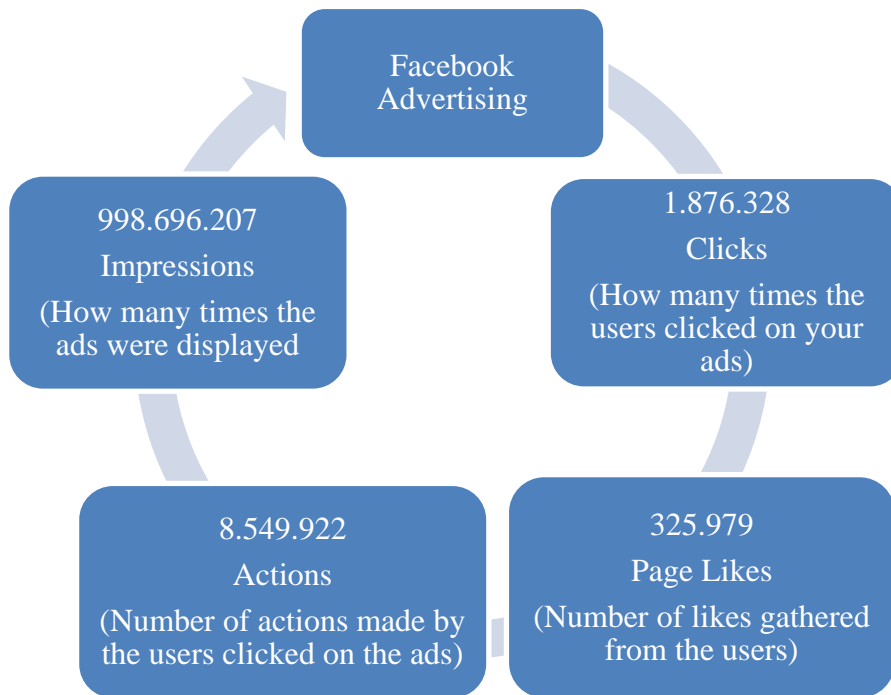
Source: General Digital Campaign Report 2013

Figure 4: Other Social Media

YouTube — 545,226 views

Twitter — 65,724 followers
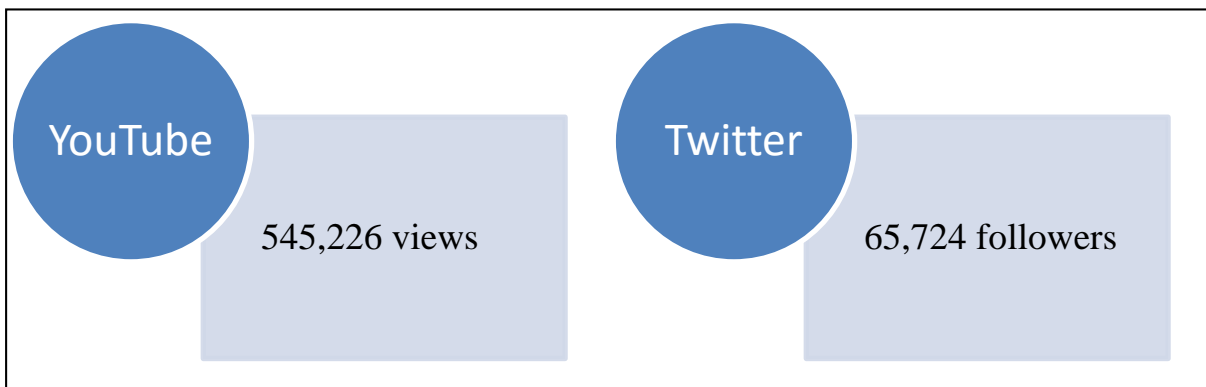
Source: General Digital Campaign Report 2013

3. 2. Rilindje.net

Rilindje.net was launched on March, 15 2013. Rilindje.net consisted of many volunteers willing to engage on in the campaign of 2013 on behalf of Albanian Socialist Party. Rilidje.net, September 2013 had more than 10,000 users. The platform proved to be a solution for organizing volunteers online and getting them engaged in the political campaign.

The platform's main objectives were:

- o Spread the Albanian Socialist Party's messages via internet

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    o   Engage people in the activities undertaken by Albanian Socialist Party

    o   Collect data about supporters

This platform aimed to gathering the youth and volunteers supporting Socialist Party too. The working hours in this network functions with a system of points. The volunteers work was measured with points, the login in the website and the fulfillment of the registration part had 45 points. Every share of the posts had 8 points, each comment posted in the website got 2 points, and every postcard sent via e-mail got 2 points.

Furthermore, Rilindje.net organized a contest among volunteers. Starting from June 1, until June 23, five contests in total were held. These were as follows:

    o   Voters contest

    o   Points for activities at 10 o'clock

    o   Invitations contest

    o   Post a 29 on a photo

    o   My voting team

Table below shows total registration of volunteers who used the network. Until June 23, 2013 there were registered more than 8180 volunteers who contributed in the elections campaign.
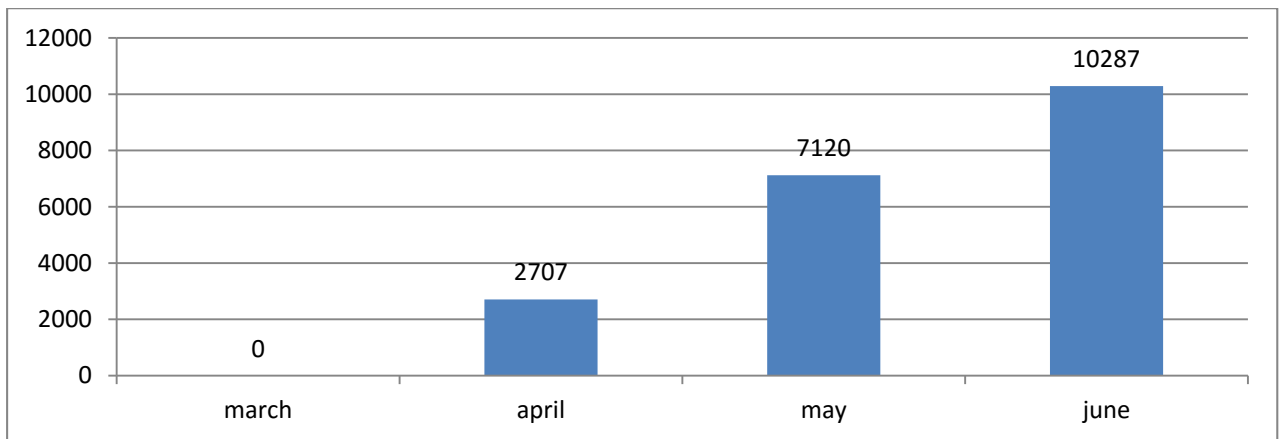
Table 1: Users logging in to the network of Rilindje.net
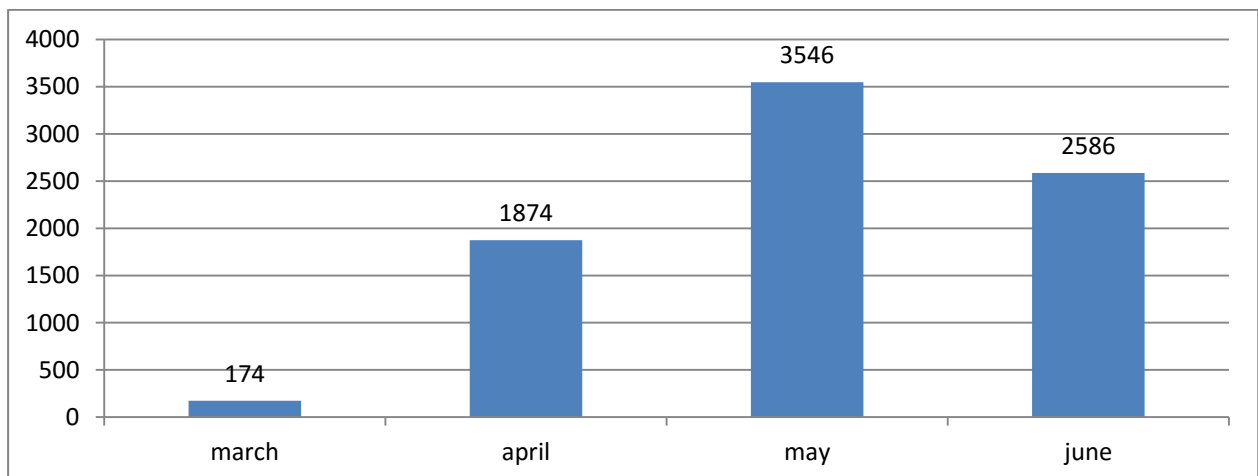
Source: General Digital Campaign Report 2013

The total value of the log-in actions until June 23, 2013 was 20,114 and it represented the actions taken by users during their activity in the network.
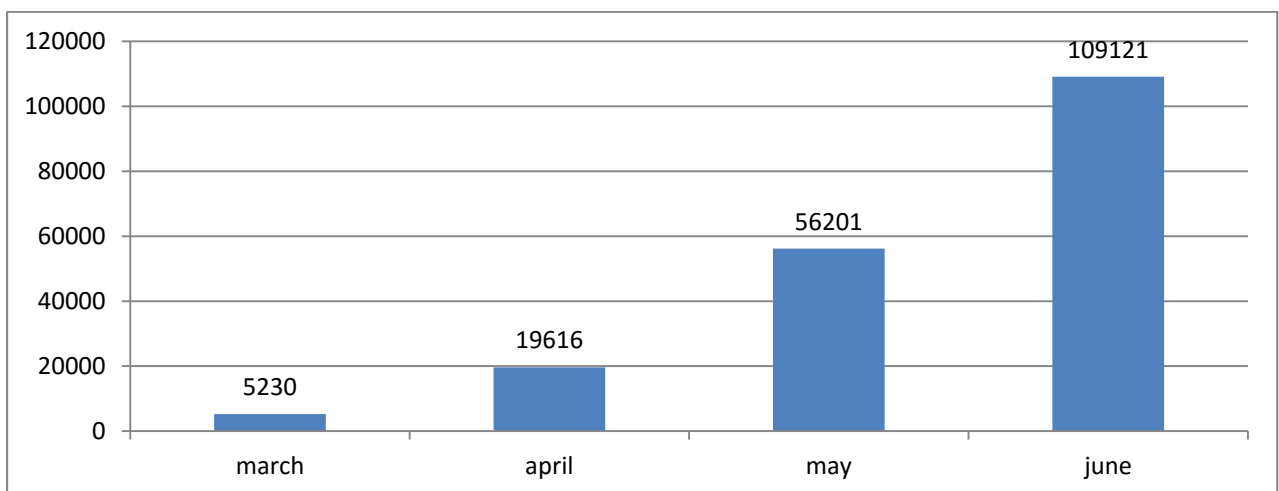
Table 2: Log in actions

Source: General Digital Campaign Report 2013

According to the chart below, the total number of reward actions made by the registered users until June 29, 2013 were 109,121.
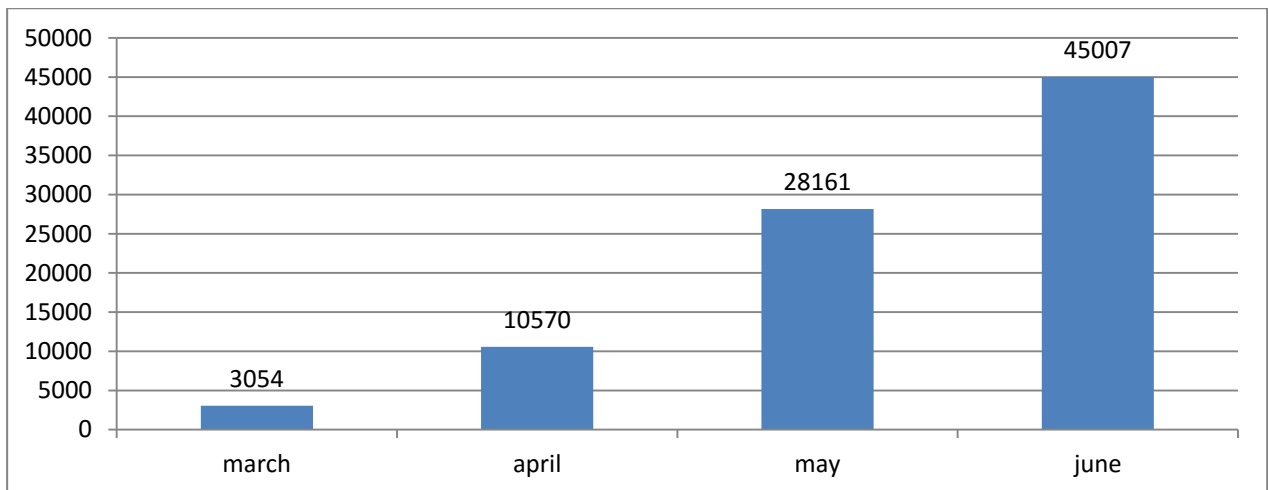
Table 3: Reward actions until June 2013.

Source: General Digital Campaign Report 2013

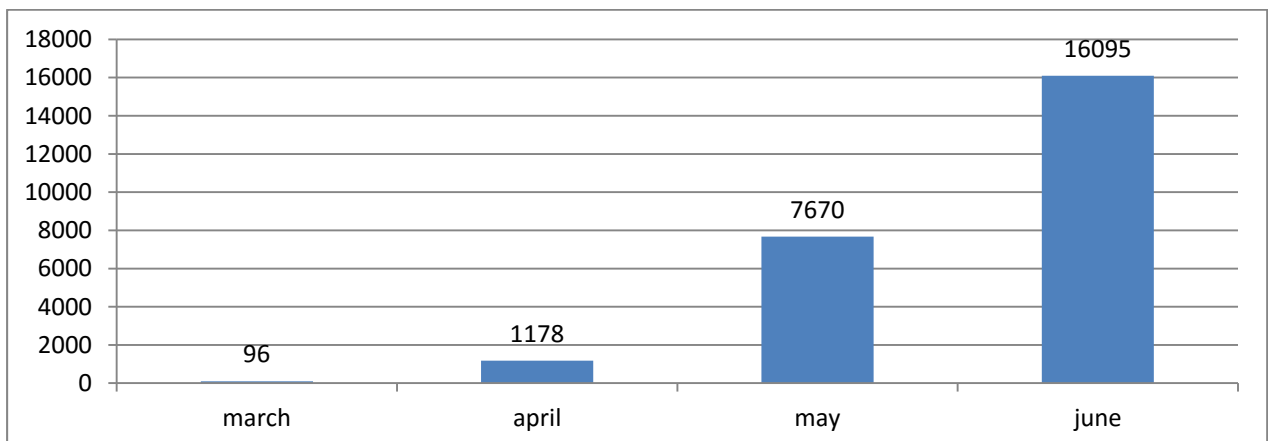The total number of comments posted by registered users on news websites until June 2013 was 86,792.

Table 4: Total number of comments posted.

Bar chart showing total number of comments posted by month:
- march: 3054
- april: 10570
- may: 28161
- june: 45007

Source: General Digital Campaign Report 2013

The chart below shows the total number of shared articles from one section of the website and the share section which was 25,039 in total.

Table 5: Total number of shared article from one section of the website

Bar chart showing total number of shared articles by month:
- march: 96
- april: 1178
- may: 7670
- june: 16095

Source: General Digital Campaign Report 2013

The chart below represents the total number of the sure votes recommended by the registered users until 24th of June 2013 and it was 4,650 in total.

Table 6: Total number of sure voters recommended by registered users until 24 June 2013
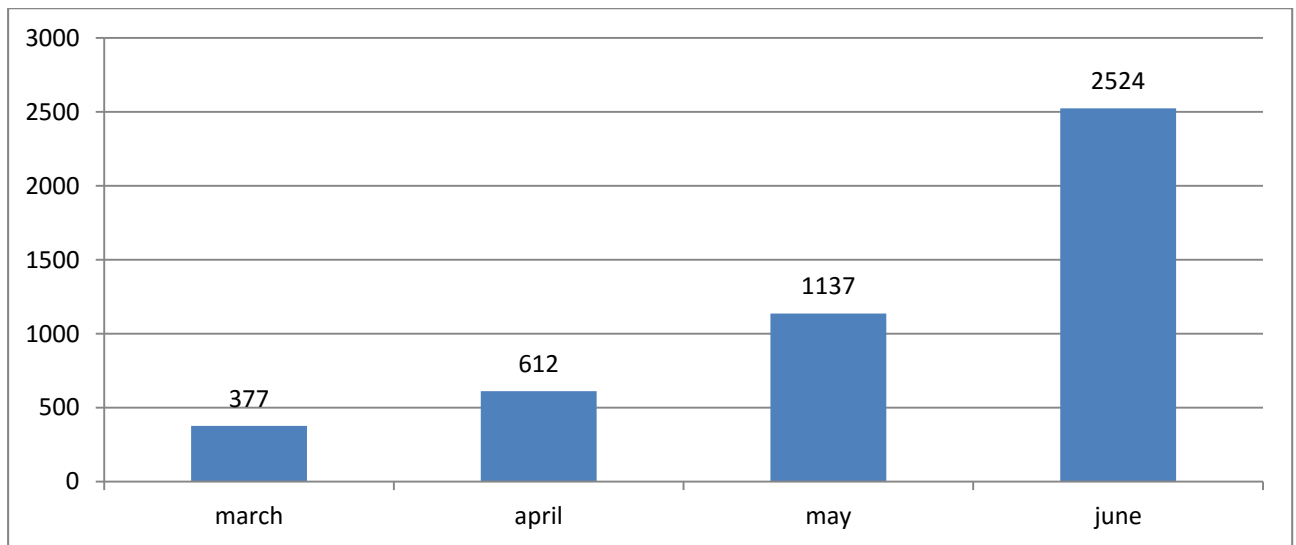
Source: General Digital Campaign Report 2013

Conclusion

Nowadays marketing field has become a vital factor in the decisions regarding society. It is a crucial factor in politics too and political marketing has been considered as a key part for the affecting elections and political campaigns. The politicians have begun to practice many approaches aiming to bring new perspective for the marketing of their respective parties. The political parties use innovative ideas to respond some of the challenges that may occur during campaigns. Moreover, the development of technology brought a new approach of communication and message sharing with public. Social media is involved deeply with everything and everyone. Even the political parties are using it to communicate and deliver their messages to the citizens. According to the data above, the Socialist Party of Albania has been empowered through the social media support because of its direct influence to the public. During the election campaign in June 2013 they introduced the network of Rilindje.net which was created to support and gather all the volunteers of Socialist Party. The platform proved to be a solution for organizing volunteers online and getting them involved in the elections campaign and it resulted to be a history of success, since the Socialist Party won the elections with the majority of votes. Beside the citizens' support for the party, the network of young

volunteers who contributed for the campaign has been very valuable too. The marketing of the political parties is a comprehensive strategy to deliver the right messages in the right time in order to achive the desired goals. The most important key factors that make up a good strategy are the message, the messenger and the channel of message. Political marketing has now established itself as lively sub-discipline of marketing, producing considerable information for the next generations who will contribute for the country.

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