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FROM RIGHT TO LEFT: HOW BARDELLA AND FRENCH POLITICAL ACTORS NAVIGATE TIKTOK POLITICS

Mael Bombaci
Università LUMSA

Francesco Nespoli
Università LUMSA

Simone Mulargia
Università LUMSA

Introduction

Recently, political participation has declined in many post-industrial democracies, especially among young citizens (Ekström & Sveningsson, 2019). In response, political parties have been using new media to re-engage with the political process (Amoretti and Santaniello, 2021). An example in Europe is the French far- right National Rally's 2024 legislative campaign, which saw its support among 18-24-year-olds rise from 12% to 29% (Ifop, 2024). These results could partly be due to the use of platforms not traditionally central to political discourse (Severin-Nielsen, 2023), such as TikTok, and to the party's narrative and communication model, which seamlessly integrates with the logic of politainment (Bucher & Helmond, 2018).

Theoretical framework

In the contemporary postmodern mass media context, there is an ongoing trend toward the spectacularization of both public and private events, a complex feature of the network society (Castells, 1996). Political actors are similarly subject to these logics, contributing to the creation of a real "political spectacle" that highlights the close relationship between spectacularisation and politics (Edelman, 1988). Within this dynamic, politicians can gain media access, improve their image, and, in particular, attract less politically interested voters by presenting themselves in an entertaining context (Dörner, 2001). Furthermore, political actors are expected to emulate celebrities in a pop spectacle, becoming the so-called 'pop politics' (Berrocal-Gonzalo et al., 2022). Social media platforms focus public attention on the personal aspects of politicians, emphasising the personification and privatisation of their communicative characteristics (Ekman and Widholm, 2017). Moreover, the process of political personalisation

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indicates that individual political actors have assumed greater significance than political parties and other collective entities (Campus, 2010).

Politicians are aware of the potential to reconnect with young people through social media (Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2021), where the pursuit of engagement necessitates the adaptation to the affordances of the platform (Bucher & Helmond, 2018) and the adoption of entertainment strategies or emotional appeals. TikTok seems to provide an optimal context for the expression of politainment logic, especially considering that it is the social media of choice for Gen Z (Abidin et al., 2022). The communication on TikTok is typified by a highly visual, vernacular and meme-based form (Zeng et al., 2020). Candidates adapt to this mode of communication by utilizing the platform's affordances (Cervi et al., 2023).

This paper examines how French nationalists reframe their image through communication strategies, comparing the *Rassemblement National's* approach with that of the other two major parties in France. The analysis focuses on the TikTok content shared by Jordan Bardella for the *Rassemblement National*, Gabriel Attal, spokesman for *Renaissance*, and Jean-Luc Mélenchon, leader of *La France Insoumise*.

Method

We want to contribute to fill the gap in knowledge about the strategic use of TikTok for political purposes (Zamora-Medina et. al 2023) by asking:

(Q1) How does the political communication of the *Rassemblement National* intersect with pop culture?

(Q2) How does this approach differ from or align with the strategies employed by other major political parties?

In order to answer these queries, an audio-visual content analysis was conducted (Bell, 2001) on all the 131 videos published by the representatives of the parties on TikTok during the 2024 electoral campaign (Lilleker et al., 2023).

The initial stage of the analysis focused on examining the ways in which TikTok's affordances are employed, starting with the category of genre. For example, TikTok's green screen enhances engagement by visually highlighting topics (Maddox & Gill, 2023), while the Duet feature enables reactions (Hautea et al., 2021). Content may incorporate effects, text, and music, which is one of TikTok's distinctive features (Vizcaíno-Verdú & Abidin, 2022). In terms of video content, the analysis identifies four distinct categories: political, personal, entertainment and backstage themes. Political content includes policy-focused and competition-driven frames (Dekavalla, 2016), while personal content highlights candidates' roles or private lives (Metz et al., 2020). TikTok favors entertainment, including non-political and informal "backstage" content to engage youth (Zamora-Medina et al., 2023). Lastly, the recording type, whether selfie-style, homemade, or professionally shot, also reflects each candidate's communication style (Cervi et al., 2023).

In analysing the interaction between popular culture and political communication, a number of key dimensions were considered. Firstly, the expression of emotions is of considerable significance. Videos with emotional undertones can effectively engage viewers and serve as a conduit for communication between politicians and citizens

(Jaramillo-Dent et al., 2022). The use of language based on emotional content and the application of irony or satire are elements that contribute to this dimension. Another aspect related to pop culture is the "celebration of the candidate," which encompasses the candidate's representation in both ordinary and extraordinary settings. Furthermore, it is important to note the distinction between hard and soft subject matter, as this shapes the content's topic, focus and stylistic dimensions. While there is no single accepted definition of hard and soft news, it is clear that each type of news contributes in a distinctive manner to the framing and conveyance of political messages to the public (Reinemann et al., 2012).

Key Findings

The main results of the analysis indicate that Bardella employs the affordances of TikTok in a way that strategically aligns his public image with the language of populism and resonates with younger demographics. Bardella employs the platform's viral sounds as a backdrop for his videos, a practice that positions him within the prevailing digital trends, thereby reinforcing his connection with the audiences. Similarly, the use of emojis in captions and comments, even when it comes to relevant political topics, helps create a visually immediate communication that is accessible to a wide range of audiences. Bardella often addresses politically relevant issues that could be classified as 'hard'. However, he does so using communicative strategies that differ from the traditional way of addressing these issues.

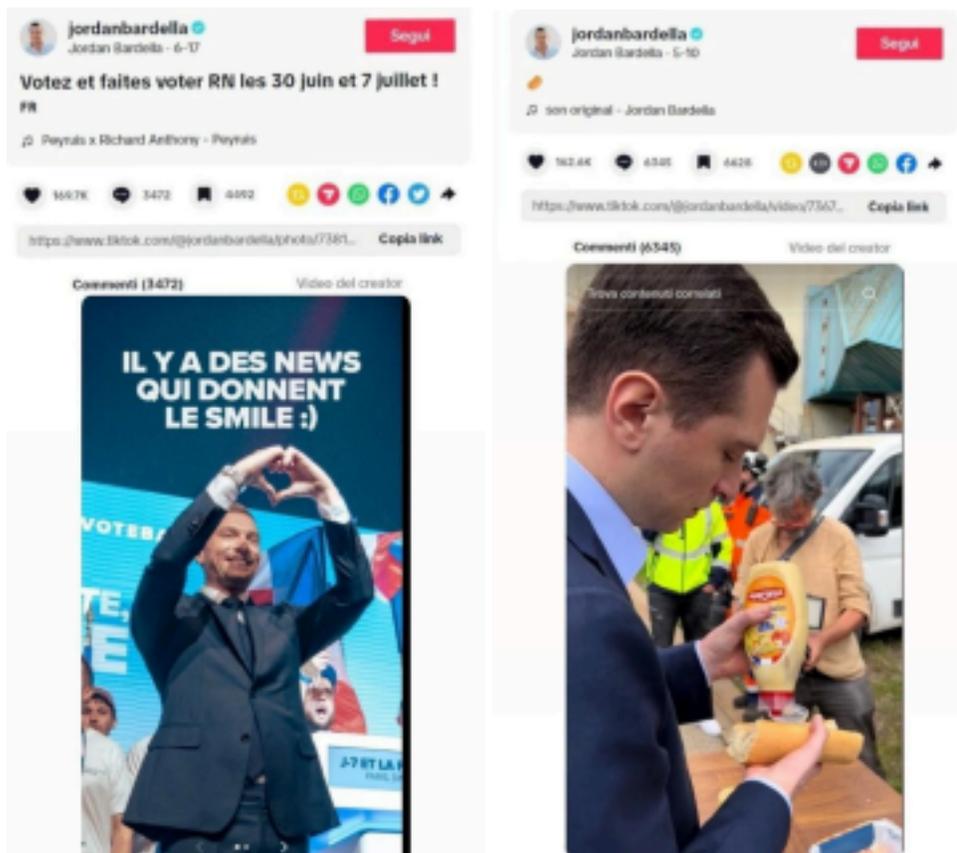


Figure 1.

Example of Bardella posts using emojis and informal visual communication.

The analysis of Mélenchon's content shows that he does not adapt his communication style to TikTok, primarily sharing TV excerpts and maintaining a traditional, top-down approach that contrasts with the platform's participatory nature.



Figure 2. Example of Mélenchon's top-down communication approach.

Attal, on the other hand, tries to engage with TikTok's features by using native formats and visual strategies. However, his content looks staged and overly polished. Despite his efforts to embrace the platform, his content lacks authenticity and coherence, failing to strike the right balance between two key elements of TikTok: spontaneity and authenticity.



Figure 3. Example of Attal's use of the platform's affordances.

Conclusion

Bardella is an example of how traditional party values can coexist with modern communication practices, using social media to engage young audiences. His approach is in line with politainment, which makes political issues more appealing, reduces the gap between the public and political actors, and reinforces his image as a representative of the people. Conversely, it is interesting to note that Mélenchon and Attal, while dealing with more 'pop' issues that reflect the core values of their respective parties, adopt traditional communication approaches.

This study opens several avenues for future research, including cross-country comparisons to identify digital communication patterns that reshape politainment dynamics and to demonstrate how political candidates attempt to connect with and appeal to younger generations while identifying whether specific features characterize right-, center-, and left-wing approaches.

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