



ORIGINAL PAPER

How micro-agenda setters acted in the 2024 Romanian presidential election campaign

Adina-Loredana Dogaru¹⁾

Abstract:

Social media era has transformed the agenda-setting process by altering the dynamic relationships among the public agenda, media agenda, and political agenda. Social media platforms enable quick access to social or political information, generating citizen participation (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012). Many studies have focused on the effectiveness of online communication between the political actors and the public, online political participation (Boulianne, 2009, 2015; Bode, 2012; Gil de Zúñiga, Jung and Valenzuela, 2012; Gil de Zúñiga, H., Weeks, B., & Ardèvol-Abreu, A., 2017; Dimitrova, Matthes, 2018; Wojcik, 2005 et al.), controversies related to online political participation (Flichy, 2008; Lee, Hosanagar & Nair, 2014; Morozov, 2011; Wojcik, 2005, 2011) and the investigation of agenda setting (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). The present research is based on the premise that agenda setting as a political process is influenced by social media communication and online participation in political activity influences the media agenda, public agenda and political communication, relating and interconnecting. As we will see next, social networks have the potential to generate the re-examination of the political agenda or become arenas of political mobilization among groups that are traditionally left out of the debate or less visible (Segaard, 2015; Dogaru-Tulică, 2019). How did the Romanian online environment manage to change the public agenda at a time of great social and political pressure? is one of the key questions that the present study seeks to address, building on the concept of micro-agenda setters—an extension of agenda-setting theory that explores how individual actors or small groups shape public perceptions on issues of interest (Casero-Ripollés, 2020). Using the qualitative focus-group research method, this paper shows that micro agenda setters play a crucial role in the formation of opinions in contexts such as election campaigns, influencing the main topics of discussion of online communities.

Keywords: *online political participation, agenda setting, social media, political communication, micro-agenda setters, presidential campaign.*

*¹⁾ Assistant Professor dr., University of Bucharest, Faculty of Journalism and Communication Sciences (FJSC), Romania, Phone: 0749378685, E-mail: loredana.dogaru@fjsc.ro, ORCID ID: 0009-0009-5987-1082.

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Introduction

In the context of contemporary digital transformation, electoral campaigns have transcended their traditional boundaries. No longer confined to televised debates or physical rallies, political communication is increasingly taking place in digital arenas, where social media platforms function as pivotal arenas of influence. Social networks provide fertile ground for political communication, implicitly for shaping voter behavior.

Within this explosive media evolution, micro-agenda setters are becoming a player in shaping perceptions and voting intentions, micro-agenda setters - influencers with varying numbers of followers, but strategically involved - have emerged as actors interested in shaping public discourse and voters' priorities, concerned with reorienting public attention and redefining the importance of specific issues.

Political communication, as the dynamic core of democratic systems, is undergoing a paradigm shift characterized by three interconnected transformations: the exponential growth of the volume of information, the continuously evolving quality of content dissemination, and the restructuring of social relations from hierarchical to network-based systems. As Roventa-Frumusani (2012, p.141) aptly observes, the system is marked by: “the quantity of information (communicational opulence, communication ecstasy), the quality of content (...), the restructuring of social relations – hierarchical, pyramidal organization replaced by reticular organization”. (...) These changes “decisively influence political communication: the explosion of information leads to *shared knowledge*, (...) re-problematizes the distance between the masses and the elites, the autonomy of members of social networks implies a reexamination of the decision”.

The 2024 Romanian presidential campaign is an emblematic case for understanding this transition, illustrating the extent to which digital platforms – and the actors operating within them – can redefine political influence. Beyond official campaign materials and traditional media coverage, a decentralized and often subtle form of influence has taken shape through micro-agenda setters. They do not necessarily operate within party structures, but in a hybrid space of media communication, acting as agents of contextualization, reframing, and prioritization of electoral themes. This evolution is leading to a reassessment of agenda setting theory in its classical form and invites further investigation into how influence operates in user-driven, but algorithmically mediated environments.

The 2024 Romanian presidential elections represented a watershed moment, highlighting the rise of micro-agenda setters as vectors of prioritization of political issues in the digital space.

Public agenda setting, political communication and social media

Agenda setting is a continuous competition among issue proponents for the attention of media professionals, the public, and political elites. Agenda setting provides an explanation for why information about certain issues and not others is available to the public in a democracy, how public opinion is formed and why certain issues are addressed through policy actions.

“The study of agenda-setting is the study of social change and social stability” (Dearing & Rogers, 1996, pp. 5-6).

“The simultaneity of the political act (decision-making) and its mediatization reinforces the similarities between media discourse/political communication: legitimacy of the ephemeral - media purpose, prominence of specific stories, *hic et nunc* (here and now)

decision, generalized intertextuality (Rovența-Frumușani, 2012, p.142). “The pressure of mediatization of political life primarily involves determining the agenda according to the barometer of public opinion and disseminating it within the framework of an accessible, seductive, memorable discourse. (idem, p.143).

The concept of 'agenda setting' belongs to McCombs and Shaw (1972). Their study revealed a strong correlation between the media agenda and the public agenda, with topics such as foreign policy, law and order, and fiscal policy appearing in similar order on both. McCombs and Shaw 202(1972) argued that the media significantly influence the public agenda, not by dictating opinions, but by determining which topics receive attention. They emphasize that through their choices in news selection and presentation, editors, journalists, and broadcasters actively contribute to the construction of political reality (p. 176).

The evolution of agenda setting theory

Walter Lippmann (1922) argues that the media are intermediaries, influencing individuals' perceptions and interpretation on the events occurring in the world. Bernard Cohen (1963) later highlighted that while the press may not often influence the specific opinions people hold, it is highly effective in directing public attention toward particular issues. Kurt and Gladys Lang, in their classic study "The Mass Media and the Shaping of Collective Behavior" (1966) emphasized the way in which the media participate in the "selection and presentation" of social and political events, giving them a symbolic status in the collective consciousness. The media direct attention to certain things, build the public image of politicians and constantly send messages to the individual, suggesting what to think about, what to know, and what to feel and experience. They argued that what the public perceives as “public reality” is largely mediated and reconfigured by the media. They observed that media coverage of events—such as presidential inaugurations or protests—does not merely reflect reality but reconstructs it, thus influencing public perception and collective behavior.

Lang and Lang thus introduced the idea that the media not only transmit information but also actively contribute to defining public priorities: “The media force attention on certain issues. They build public images of political figures.”—an idea that would later be systematically formulated under the name “agenda setting” (Lang & Lang, 1966, p. 468).

It should be emphasized that “the press, intentionally or unintentionally, structures the topics of interest and public debate. A working group always has an agenda, a list of topics to be debated in descending order of importance. Normally, topics that are not on the agenda are not debated. The “agenda” model shows how the press and especially the news [...] have the power to focus public attention on a limited list of topics, while ignoring others. As a result, some topics are insistently debated in the public space, and others are ignored” (Tim O’Sullivan, 1994, p. 8).

This formulation summarizes the essence of the theory: media influence is indirect but powerful, through prioritizing certain issues and marginalizing others. The concept of agenda setting has traditionally been associated with media institutions shaping public discourse by determining the importance of issues.

Dearing and Rogers (1988, 1996) explore the progression of social issues through three interconnected agendas:

Media agenda: the selection and prominence of issues presented by the media.

Public agenda: the issues that the public perceives as important.

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Policy agenda: the issues that policymakers prioritize.

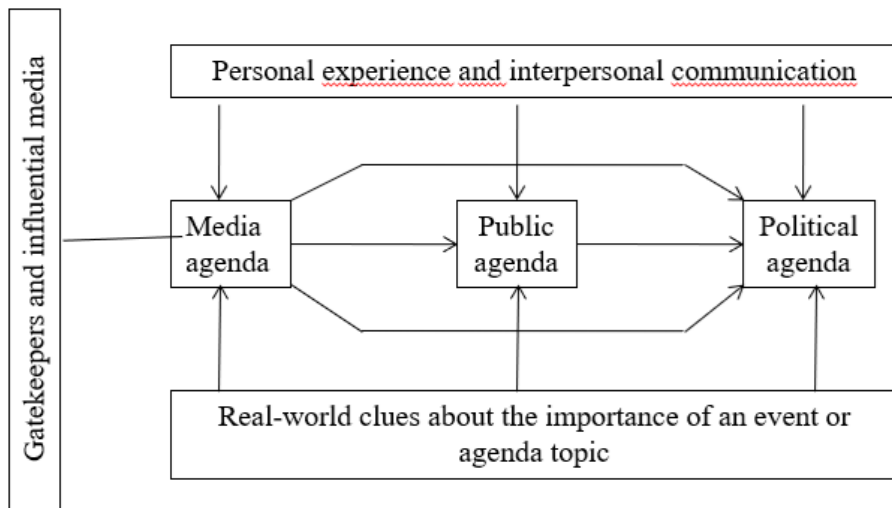


Chart no. 1: Elements of the agenda-setting process (Rogers, Dearing, 1988, pp. 555 - 594)

Agenda building is another concept that emerges and describes the process through which the agendas of political elites are shaped the media agenda and also the citizens' agenda (Barbaros, 2016).

Agenda setting and its transformations in the digital environment

Dutta-Bergman (2004) emphasizes the evolving role of the internet and new media in the agenda-setting process. She highlights the internet's growing significance as a tool for shaping public opinion, particularly in relation to political agendas. The internet introduces an additional dimension to traditional agenda-setting by facilitating direct interaction among the media, public, and political actors. This enhances the influence of new media in determining the salience of issues. This framework aligns with the concepts of personal agendas and algorithmic filtering, in which individuals curate their media consumption based on their preferences and choices. Social media platforms such as Twitter (X), Facebook, and Instagram have further transformed the media landscape by empowering users to influence the prominence of issues (Meraz, 2011). Contemporary research underscores social media's growing impact on the broader media agenda (Vargo et al., 2018). Users on platforms such as Twitter and TikTok occasionally reverse the traditional flow of agenda influence (p. 303). This dynamic was evident during the 2024 Romanian election campaign, when conventional media outlets adopted and amplified viral topics that originated on social media.

Furthermore, hashtag activism and viral content demonstrate a bottom-up approach to agenda-setting, in which public discourse shapes mainstream news coverage. "The use of social media for informational purposes is positively associated with political

participation, especially among individuals with lower levels of political interest.” (Valenzuela et al., 2017, p. 28).

There are two new variables of agenda setting theory, related to the use of the online environment: *intermedia agenda setting* and *reverse agenda setting* with the so-called micro-agenda setters.

Intermedia Agenda refers to the way in which media influence the agenda of other media institutions, not just the public. The concept was developed in the context in which journalists, editors and media institutions monitor each other’s content and influence each other in setting thematic priorities.

Intermedia agenda setting examines how different media sources influence each other’s coverage. “Intermedia agenda setting is the process by which elite or prestigious media influence what other media consider newsworthy.” (Harder, Sevenans & Van Aelst, 2017, p. 1872). Research has shown that social media can set the agenda for traditional news outlets, especially during political events and crises (Neuman et al., 2014). This dynamic interaction highlights the reciprocal nature of agenda setting in the contemporary media environment.

The 2024 Romanian presidential election campaign provides a clear illustration of intermedia agenda-setting, as key subjects (text, photos, videos) from platforms like TikTok, Facebook or Instagram such as nationalism and corruption inside traditional parties, were promoted and amplified by traditional media, reflecting the dynamics described by Harder et al. (2017). Some viral posts from social media (TikTok, Facebook) were taken up by traditional media, illustrating how IAS also works in the online → offline direction. Viral statements by candidates on TikTok can become breaking news on TV or in the mainstream press.

Neuman et al. (2014) present a contemporary, comprehensive perspective on agenda setting in the digital era, explaining how agenda-setting, framing, and priming function within today’s highly fragmented media landscape dominated by digital platforms. The article “*The Dynamics of Public Attention: Agenda-Setting Theory Meets Big Data*” published in the Journal of Communication proposes an advanced analysis of how: “In the digital age, public agendas are shaped by a multitude of sources - traditional media, social networks, algorithms, and interpersonal communication.” (Neuman et al., 2014, p. 200). Agenda-setting is more diffuse and competitive than ever, the public consumes information through multiple channels and builds their personal agendas.

In the Romanian 2024 presidential campaign, this is reflected in the simultaneous coexistence and influence of official sources, candidates’ personal channels and participatory platforms such as TikTok or YouTube. Candidates communicated simultaneously through television, Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, official websites, podcasts, etc. Voters shaped their opinions through a diverse mix of information, where framing and priming originated from multiple sources. Rather than being dictated by centralized outlets like television or newspapers, the public agenda emerged from decentralized networks and was heavily influenced by social media algorithms.

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Comparative Table 1: Classical model vs. Digital model (Neuman et al., 2014)

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>Classical Model (McCombs & Shaw, 1972)</i>	<i>Digital Model (Neuman et al., 2014)</i>
<i>Flow of influence</i>	Mass media → Public	Public ↔ Mass-media ↔ Social media ↔ Algorithms ↔ Influencers
<i>Number of main sources</i>	Limited (TV, Newspapers, Radio)	Multiple and Decentralized
<i>Control over the agenda</i>	Editors and Journalists	Distributed: public, algorithms, media, elites, platforms
<i>Feedback from the public</i>	Slow, indirect	Immediate, visible (comments, reactions, viralization)
<i>Analysis tools</i>	Opinion polls, interviews	Big Data, network analytics, content mining
<i>Typical example</i>	TV campaigns determine what topics the audience is discussing	Viral on TikTok determines what appears in the news

Reverse agenda setting challenges the traditional media-centric approach by highlighting how audiences can shape media content. “Reverse agenda setting occurs when public discourse – particularly through social media – affects what the media choose to convey.” (Meraz, 2011; Vargo et al., 2018).

Kiousis (2002) has highlighted that public engagement, particularly through digital platforms, can shift the focus of media coverage, making issues debated by the public more salient. “The salience of an issue is mediated not only by exposure but also by the credibility attributed to the media source.” (Kiousis, 2002, p. 370). The author’s research is essential in the conceptual development of agenda setting theory, as it introduces the idea of media source credibility and explores the link between media agenda and audience perceptions, especially in the emerging digital context.

Social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook have been identified as significant facilitators of this phenomenon, allowing issues to gain prominence through public discourse before being adopted by mainstream media (Boulianne, 2015). Several studies have provided empirical support for the reverse agenda setting effect. Chadwick and Dennis (2019) examined how social media influenced traditional media during the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrating that online discussions about public health measures led to significant shifts in mainstream media narratives. Bruns (2018) argued that the “gatewatching” model, in which social media users organize and amplify content, plays a crucial role in setting the public agenda. Unlike traditional “gatekeeping,” in which journalists control the flow of information, gatewatching allows the collective engagement of citizens to dictate the salience of news.

The phenomenon of reverse agenda setting, defined as the influence of public discourse on the media agenda (Meraz, 2011), was visible in the campaign for the Romanian presidential elections in 2024, where viral posts on TikTok and the reactions of online communities led the press to take up topics initially absent from the official discourse. The public becomes an active actor in shaping the mediatized political

discourse: a viral video on TikTok with a controversial statement by a candidate is later taken up by television and newspapers, the public's reactions to a sensitive topic (e.g. special pensions, sex education) become media pressure, forcing the media to address them.

Comparative Table 2: Difference from intermedia agenda setting

<i>Type of influence</i>	<i>Classic direction</i>	<i>Reverse direction</i>
Agenda setting	Media → Public	
Reverse agenda setting		Public (social media) → Media
Intermediate agenda setting	Media A → Media B	

Micro-agenda setters: decentralized and specific influence

Micro agenda setters are a concept from media agenda theory, adapted to the context of social networks, that describes how the networks on social platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter) influence young people's exposure and attitudes towards news and actuality. Micro-agenda setters are individuals or small groups from social media who influence what issues are discussed and prioritized among their online community. These networks function as "micro-agenda setters" in that individuals in a user's network can determine which topics become important to them, thus influencing their personal information and opinion agenda. The traits of these individuals can lead to negative outcomes, such as echo chambers and spirals of silence, but they can also produce positive effects by introducing new viewpoints and raising awareness of issues overlooked by traditional media (Wohn & Bowe, 2016).

Earlier research predominantly examined the influence of media institutions in agenda-setting processes; however, contemporary studies have shifted focus toward the role of individuals operating within decentralized digital platforms. The proliferation of digital media has facilitated the emergence of "micro-agenda setters," defined as individuals or small collectives who actively shape public discourse via social media and other online channels. Social media platforms empower these actors to elevate specific issues and narratives, thereby influencing broader conversations (Weeks et al., 2019). Figures such as influencers, activists, and citizen journalists have become increasingly significant in framing discourse by introducing nuanced perspectives and disseminating information that traditional media often subsequently incorporate (Meraz, 2011). Empirical evidence suggests that micro-agenda setters can affect mainstream media coverage, particularly during periods of political turmoil and social mobilization (Valenzuela et al., 2017).

This phenomenon challenges the conventional gatekeeping role traditionally held by media organizations, operating within an expanded agenda-setting framework characterized by reciprocal influences between legacy and digital media (Harder et al., 2017; Guo & Vargo, 2020). Journalistic practices have adapted accordingly, with professionals increasingly monitoring social media trends to guide editorial decisions (Neuman et al., 2014). Furthermore, the rise of digital activism, exemplified by movements such as #MeToo and Black Lives Matter, underscores the capacity of micro-agenda setters to shape media narratives and elevate public awareness (Tufekci, 2017).

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Concurrently, these actors exert considerable influence on the dissemination and public perception of issues related to austerity and governance. Turcan (2014) highlights that media-driven debates on austerity have disrupted the political landscape, contributing to the formation of dominant parliamentary majorities and the ascent of populist parties (p. 44). The dramatization of government decisions was also unprecedented and contributed to the social absorption of political figures in the media.” A decade later, social media communication exacerbated the imbalance of the political environment.

The concept of micro-agenda setters describes actors with moderate audiences, but with contextual authority and the ability to influence political discourse in small but intensely engaged digital communities. They can be content creators, activists, independent journalists or influencers with specific social networks. In agreement with Dutta-Bergman (2004), voters do not passively consume political information, but prefer sources that validate their values and identity. Thus, micro-agenda setters function as vectors of trust and thematic filtering. Kiouisis (2002) adds that the perceived credibility of the source is a key factor in establishing salience – which gives these marginal actors disproportionate influence in the digital space.

Limitations of the use of micro-agenda setters in political communication

I conclude by specifying some challenges that arise from the excessive use of micro-agenda setters:

- The large amount of user-generated content can lead to information fragmentation and selective exposure (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012).
- Despite their influence, micro-agenda setters face challenges such as information credibility, selective exposure, and disinformation (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). The spread of false information from non-traditional sources raises concerns about the reliability of agenda setting in the digital age (Tandoc et al., 2018).
- In the current context of the accelerated expansion of digital media and social networks, disinformation has become, at least at a perceptual level, one of the main sources of public concern. Studies show that a significant percentage – 85% of European citizens – perceive the spread of inaccurate or completely false information as a serious problem for their own society. (Oprea, B., 2021, p.71).
- The theory of micro-agenda setters in social media conflicts with the theory of echo chambers. According to Garimella et alii. (2018), a separate discussion related to political discourse in social media concerns the so-called “echo chambers”, meaning that citizens are becoming increasingly polarized regarding political issues, they do not also hear the arguments of the opposing side, but are rather surrounded by people and news sources that only express opinions with which they agree. This is the case of Facebook and Twitter, for example. Echo chambers work as follows: a user shares their opinion, and the chamber, i.e. the social network around the user, allows the opinion to echo back to the user, because it is also shared, distributed by others. In the case of social media, the echo chamber theory states that users consume content that expresses the same point of view as their own.

International examples that illustrate agenda setting theory and the intermediate variables agenda setting and reverse agenda setting:

- A clear example of reverse agenda setting occurred during the Black Lives Matter movement. The media's increased coverage of systemic racism, police violence, and social justice was driven by mounting public concern and protests over incidents of police brutality, especially those involving George Floyd in 2020.

- The Obama administration's policies provided a unique case study in which micro-agenda setters contributed to both supportive and oppositional movements. On March 23, 2010, President Obama signed the Affordable Care Act (ACA), also known as Obamacare, into law. This was one of Obama's signature policies and saw extensive engagement from micro-agenda setters. Supporters used social media campaigns. They used campaigns such as #GetCovered. These campaigns promoted the policy. Meanwhile, critics used digital spaces. They used these spaces to challenge the policy. This decentralized discussion influenced public sentiment and mainstream media narratives (Weeks et al., 2019). Social media influencers played a crucial role in shaping the public discourse around Obamacare as agenda setters. Barack Obama himself participated in digital campaigns, appearing in a viral Funny or Die interview with Zach Galifianakis, which significantly increased enrollment. Celebrities such as Ellen DeGeneres, LeBron James, John Legend, Kerry Washington used Twitter and Instagram to encourage enrollment. The #GetCovered campaign, supported by influencers and advocacy groups, generated widespread engagement, especially among young adults and marginalized communities.

Research area:

The role of micro-agenda setters in influencing political perceptions in the Romanian presidential elections – November 2024

In an era where social networks shape political perceptions and decisions, the 2024 Romanian presidential elections brought to the forefront an increasingly relevant phenomenon: micro-agenda setters – small or medium-sized influencers who manage to set the information agenda within their circles of followers. These actors, far from being established public figures, have been at the center of strategic campaigns to subtly influence the electorate, especially the young audience.

Objective - The research aims to identify divergent and convergent perceptions of Romanian voters from different generations and educational backgrounds regarding the influence of social networks and their role in setting the agenda in the 2024 presidential elections.

The focus group method in political communication research: application in the context of the November 202 presidential elections in Romania

Justification for the choice of method

The focus group method is a valuable tool in qualitative research in the field of political communication, providing direct access to the perceptions, attitudes and reasoning of voters. This method involves organizing guided discussions between strategically selected participants, in a moderated setting, with the aim of exploring in depth how the political message is received and understood (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

In the context of the Romanian presidential elections, held in November 2024, focus groups become particularly relevant for investigating how voters interact with political content in digital media. The emergence of micro-agenda setters, influencers with moderate but highly engaged audiences, has contributed to reshaping the channels through which electoral information circulates and gains relevance. Thus, focus groups allow for the examination of differences in perception between various segments of the electorate – depending on age, education, profession and media consumption – and provide a contextualized understanding of the process of personal agenda formation. By applying this method, the research captures not only individual opinions, but also the discursive dynamics, mechanisms of intersubjective influence and forms of meaning negotiation that

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arise within group interactions. Unlike quantitative surveys, which measure the frequency of opinions, focus groups reveal the complexity of electoral thinking, including contradictions, hesitations and affective interpretations of political messages.

Methodology:

Two focus groups were organized with participants selected to reflect the demographic diversity of the Romanian electorate:

Focus group 1: 8 participants (18-35 years old, 50% women, 50% men, high school and university education); They are frequent users of platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, Facebook.

Focus group 2: 8 participants (35-65 years old, 50% women, 50% men, high school and higher education); They predominantly use television, Facebook, WhatsApp groups and online media.

The selection followed the principles of controlled heterogeneity to avoid polarization or domination of the discussion by cohesive groups (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Participants were recruited through nomination and self-selection, excluding individuals with declared political affiliation. This approach highlights how social platforms, the media agenda, and personal experiences intersect in the construction of contemporary political perception.

Two focus groups with contrasting profiles were conducted to ensure triangulation of perceptions:

Table 3: Composition of focus groups

<i>Focus Group</i>	<i>Composition</i>
Focus group 1	Young people aged 18–35, students, digital creators, freelancers, employees in the private sector; mostly urban. Media consumption: dominantly digital (TikTok, Instagram, YouTube).
Focus group 2	Adults between 35–65 years old, teachers, civil servants, technical and public service workers, retirees; mixed urban-rural background. Media consumption: mixed (TV, Facebook, online press).

Each group was composed of 8 participants, selected through theoretical sampling, with attention to gender diversity, training and attitude towards digital politics.

Interview guide:

The moderator followed a set of semi-structured questions, designed to stimulate dialogue and reflection on the relationship between electoral communication and individual perception:

1. What were the main sources of political information in the 2024 presidential campaign?
2. Have you noticed people (micro-influencers, friends, acquaintances) who promoted themes or candidates on social networks? How did you perceive these interventions?
3. What impact did the messages/campaigns distributed by micro-agenda setters have on your opinions or voting decision?

4. Have you participated in online discussions/groups about elections? How did you perceive the atmosphere and quality of information?

5. How do you compare the influence of social media with that of traditional media in forming opinions about candidates?

6. What are the risks and benefits of involving micro-agenda setters in electoral campaigns?

Response analysis and thematic coding

1. Information sources – purpose: to assess the general perception of the role of social networks in electoral information.

Focus group 1 (youth, social media):

The majority mentioned social networks (TikTok, Instagram, Facebook) as the main source of information, appreciating the speed and diversity of opinions. Traditional sources (TV, radio) were used only for validation or within the family.

Focus group 2 (adults, mass media):

Television and online mass- media remained the main sources of information.

Social media was used more passively, to receive information distributed by relatives/friends.

Emerging themes:

Social networks as the main source of electoral contact for young people.

Positive perception regarding accessibility, but negative regarding credibility.

Most young participants considered social media to be the “center of gravity” of the campaign, but also a chaotic space. One respondent said: “You bump into politics even when you don’t want to. I was scrolling TikTok and an election clip would pop up between two dances.”

2. Visibility of micro-agenda setters – purpose: understanding the informal influence coming from the close network or influencers.

Focus group 1 (youth, social media):

Participants noted the presence of micro-influencers or politically active friends, who promoted issues or candidates, sometimes subtly, sometimes explicitly.

Messages coming from people they identified with had a greater impact.

Focus group 2 (adults, mass media):

The influence of micro-influencers was considered low, but messages distributed by trusted people (family, friends) still had an impact.

Emerging themes:

High symbolic legitimacy of niche influencers.

Perception of authenticity compared to traditional politicians.

Young people reported that opinions expressed by peers or lifestyle influencers had a major impact: “If I’ve been following someone for years and they say ‘go vote,’ I listen to them. I don’t look at what the candidate says on Facebook.”

3. Impact of micro-agenda setter messages - purpose: identifying exposure to disinformation or polarizing content.

Focus group 1 (youth, social media):

Many admitted that certain viral campaigns or personalized messages influenced their perception of candidates, especially when integrated into lifestyle content.

Some mentioned that their voting decision was influenced by arguments presented by micro-influencers.

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Focus group 2 (adults, mass media):

Participants stated that their voting decision was less influenced by social media, but some topics promoted online ended up being discussed within the family.

Emerging themes:

Frequent distribution via Facebook and WhatsApp in group 2.

Young people encountered such messages on TikTok, but with an ironic filter.

Expressions such as “anti-EU/NATO narratives”, “conspiracy videos”, “pro-Russian messages”, “lack of verification”, “I saw them, but I didn’t believe them” were used.

Many participants acknowledged exposure to false or propagandistic content, but they varied in their response to it: *“I saw posts saying ‘don’t vote, everything is rigged’. I found it manipulative, but others in the group took them seriously.”*

4. Participation in online discussions – purpose: determining the dominant media channels in influencing the voting decision.

Focus group 1 (youth, social media):

Participants were active in discussion groups on WhatsApp, Facebook or Telegram, where they noted both the diversity of opinions, as well as polarization and disinformation.

Some appreciated moderated groups, others avoided toxic spaces.

Focus group 2 (adults, mass media):

Participation in online discussions was reduced; preference went towards face-to-face discussions or passively following online conversations.

Emerging themes:

Facebook and WhatsApp as centers for passive content distribution.

Younger participants avoided groups or perceived them as invasive.

The following phrases were also used in group discussions: “polarized groups”, “political memes”, “unverified news”, “tense atmosphere”, “casual discussions”.

A respondent from group 2 noted: *“On the school parents’ WhatsApp group, someone would send anti-candidate articles every day. I wouldn’t even respond, but people would read.”*

5. Social media vs. traditional media – purpose: to determine the dominant media channels in influencing the voting decision.

Focus group 1 (youth, social media):

Social media was viewed as more impactful and significant for the younger generation, offering exposure to a wide range of opinions and viral content.

Focus group 2 (adults, mass media):

Traditional mass media was perceived as more credible, but participants acknowledged the increasing impact of social media on young people.

Emerging themes:

Mass media still has authority among people 40+, but young people perceive it as distant.

Voting decisions are rarely attributable to a single source.

Frequently used phrases: “TV = structuring ideas”, “social media = emotional impulse”, “combination of sources”, “TV more credible than TikTok”.

Older participants stated that *“you make the decision with your head, not with your phone”*, while young people indicated that social networks “create the context” in which the motivation to vote appears.

6. Risks and benefits regarding micro-agenda setters – purpose: assessing the impact of social platforms in electoral mobilization.

Focus group 1 (youth, social media):

Rapid dissemination of information, increasing youth participation, personalization of messages, bringing into discussion topics ignored by the media.

Focus group 2 (adults, traditional media):

Spreading misinformation, polarizing communities, manipulating public opinion, difficulty verifying information

Emerging themes:

Social networks are essential for mobilization, not just for information.

Young people feel a positive pressure to participate from their networks.

Frequently used phrases: “TikTok was decisive”, “influencer campaigns”, “herd effect”, “without social media I wouldn’t have voted”, “you can’t reach young people without Insta and TikTok”, etc.

A participant from group 1 stated: “A clip made by a comedian convinced me to vote, not an official commercial. It was funny, but also serious at the same time.”

Table 4: Comparative summary of focus group questions

Aspect analyzed	Focus group 1 (youth, social media)	Focus group 2 (adults, media)
Main source of information	Social media, online groups	TV, online mass-media, passive social media
Visibility of micro-agenda setters	High, direct influence	Low, indirect influence (through the network)
Impact on voting	Medium high, especially through viral content	Low, but some topics have reached the family
Participation in online discussions	Active, diversity and polarization	Low, preference for offline discussions
Media credibility	Skepticism, multiple verification	Higher trust in media and TV influencers
Risks and benefits	Focus on personalization and viralization, but also on the risk of misinformation	Limited benefits, higher perceived risks

Conclusions and theoretical implications:

The results obtained confirm the hypotheses according to which social networks play an increasingly active role in establishing the perceived political agenda, especially among young voters. *Micro-agenda setters* – influencers or content creators with moderate but intensely connected audiences – manage to outline topics of interest, to mobilize emotionally and to influence the selection of relevant topics for the electorate.

Micro-agenda setters had a significant impact on young people, influencing both the topics of discussion and the perception of candidates.

For adults, the impact was lower, but not non-existent: personal networks functioned as micro-agenda setters, especially in a family context. Social media facilitated exposure to diverse opinions, but also increased the risk of polarization and misinformation. Traditional media remains the main source for adults, but the influence of social media is growing, especially among young people

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The differences between the two groups validate the hypothesis of the fragmentation of the electoral agenda according to age, education and information channel. Young people are receptive to an informal, collaborative agenda, built online, while the mature public remains anchored in the classic paradigms of political communication. These findings support both the *intermedia agenda setting* theory and the *reverse agenda setting* theory.

This reality confirms a transition from the classic unidirectional model (media → public) to a *reticular dynamic*, in which content circulates between media, social networks and the public in a circular, participatory flow. Phenomena such as *intermedia agenda setting* (Harder et al., 2017), *reverse agenda setting* (Meraz, 2011) and *networked salience* (Vargo et al., 2018) become not only theoretically valid, but operational in the analysis of digital electoral campaigns.

Guiding directions for political communication strategies

1. Integrating micro-agenda setters into the digital strategy

Parties and candidates should collaborate (transparently and ethically) with influencers who are active in relevant online communities – not just for message amplification, but for contextual legitimacy. Impact is not measured only in reach, but in the density of interactions and symbolic authority.

2. Adapting content to the logic of each platform

Rigid, formal or culturally unadapted messages do not perform on TikTok or Instagram. A creative, narrative and visual approach specific to each platform is required.

3. Monitoring viral topics and reacting quickly

Candidates and their teams should follow not only the press, but also social media trends, to identify in real time emerging topics that shape public opinion (dynamic agenda building).

4. Authenticity and dialogue, not just transmission

Users – especially young people – value authentic interaction and reciprocity. One-way communication is perceived as artificial and rejected.

5. Combating disinformation through trusted opinion leaders

Campaigns should co-opt educational or specialized content creators to correct distorted messages, in an informal but credible setting for the public.

Limitations of the study and future directions

This research is exploratory, limited by the small sample (two focus groups) and the subjective nature of the qualitative data. It cannot be generalized to the entire electorate, but it offers valuable clues about perceptual differences and new centers of influence.

For future research, I propose: complementing the qualitative data with quantitative analyses (e.g. surveys, social media analytics), studying the networks of dissemination of political content in digital environments, investigating the role of artificial intelligence and algorithms in promoting certain thematic agendas.

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Article Info

Received: May 18 2025

Accepted: May 26 2025

How to cite this article:

Dogaru, A. L. (2025). How micro-agenda setters acted in the 2024 Romanian presidential election campaign. *Revista de Științe Politice. Revue des Sciences Politiques*, no. 86, pp. 104 – 120.