Title: MPs' Use of Social Networking Sites**.** A cross-national research

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Abstract

According to literature, the theory of media logic is dominant and is here to stay. Although, there is no real answer from the theory of media logic to multiple media channels, fragmentation of audiences and rising electoral instability. The internet carries the possibility to the electorate to successfully change the direction of communication and change from consumers to prosumers (producers and consumers). Social media is now seen as the fastest media (see the case of Boston bombings and the Twitter). Despite all this, social media includes specifics of media logics.

During the last three years I have been conducting research on party websites (Merkovity 2010; 2011a, 2011b; 2012) and with an Australian and Latvian research team on email responsiveness of the MPs (Major 2012; Merkovity et al. 2012; Merkovity 2013). This same team is currently conducting a research project on MPs Facebook use. We are analyzing the interactivity, responsiveness and the nature of MPs communication on the social media. These research projects are promising, but they have unexpected results, as well.

At the beginning of the project we expected that most of the MPs are using Facebook to demonstrate their openness to the new ICTs, but they do not actually use them to keep daily contact with their voters. This assumption has already been confirmed in the first phase of the research project, when we analyzed the email use of the MPs. On the basis of the previous results, we expected a preference for a unidirectional practice of communication in Facebook research as well. Our expectations were justified. Most MPs who are using new media, are applying different logics than what they are used to. They are "the media" on social media, and their characteristics are: MPs are identifying with the public; public is addressed as citizen; the journalism role is secondary, entertaining and skeptical-cynical; the reports are interpretative; agenda is set by the political events.

In my presentation I will introduce findings from above mentioned research, which could prove the emergence of a new logic of MPs on social media. This logic is different from party logic and from media logic. Its main goal is not to create an alternative 'public sphere', but rather to create a 'lap dog' media, where the politician could have its own media sphere.

Title: Tweeting the EU elections: A cross-national study

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Abstract

The upcoming European elections provide an opportunity for comparative research on political communication. This paper aims to outline the theoretical framework and methodological approach for a cross-national research project that investigates the changing role of the media in the context of political communication.

Mass media have traditionally functioned as the intermediary between society and political institutions. The rise of social media, however, offers the potential for both politicians and citizens to circumvent the media, and directly influence each other. This process potentially results in the emergence of a networked public sphere, in which citizens, journalists, political elites and other stakeholders can actively participate in public discourse. The project employs agenda-setting theory, a framework often used in election campaign research, which enables to explore the changing relationship between the media, political elites and citizens. We combine traditional agenda- setting theory with network analysis to capture the potential and impact of social media for political communication.

By framing the research around an analysis of Twitter communications during the 2014 European elections from a national/cross-national perspective, we investigate *(a)* how

political elites use Twitter for online election campaigning and *(b)* how and to what extent the national contexts of the elections intersect with the European level.

The projects include studies from a number of countries, geographically spread throughout Europe. The country-specific studies follow the same basic research framework: The political candidates and parties for the EU elections are the main units of analysis. Twitter accounts of candidates and parties will be followed, using the YourTwapperkeeper infrastructure. This procedure allows for comparative analyses (whereas for a hashtag based approach, this is less likely the case) of how politicians engage with other types of actors in debating issues related to the elections.

The analysis put forth is a combined network and content analysis. First step is a 'user-user' network analysis based on mentions, replies and retweets. National candidates will mention or are mentioned by other users in the debate. It is interesting to see whether these 'other users' reflect accounts of (1) the same country, (2) other countries or (3) to the EU itself. Subsequently, content analyses is applied to a sample of the tweets, identifying overall topics as well as further indications of national versus cross-national focuses within the debates. Besides being the first study of national versus cross-national debates online in relation to EP elections, the project also applies a combined methods approach.

Title: Parties, Pirates and Politicians: Twitter campaigns before the 2014 EP Elections

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Abstract

The ongoing expansion of new communication technologies and platforms is inseparably linked to transformation in the field of political communication. A new logic of communication and social organization is embedded directly in the code of popular social networks, among other platforms. Formal political organizations are struggling to adapt to these new circumstances. Some of them are trying to appropriate the communication logic of new connective activist networks, some are sticking to traditional methods and mass media campaigning. Can a formal political party successfully implement decentralized, networked mode of communication based on personal connections and weak social ties, or is it against the very logic of both the hierarchical organizations and the technology itself? Can the technology itself replace diminishing formal political organizations?

We are trying to describe the vast spectrum of various approaches and tactics of political actors on social networks through complex analysis of Twitter campaigning in Czech Republic before the elections to the European Parliament in May 2014. The eclectic and highly personalized nature of campaigns before elections to European Parliament provides a unique opportunity both for politicians and researchers – to experiment with new ways of communication with the voters and to perform an innovative analysis of the campaigns. We believe that a simple quantitative or qualitative analysis is not a suitable tool for complex analysis of dynamic patterns of digital communication networks. Instead, a complex, computer-assisted data retrieval and analysis allows us to fully grasp the shape of fluid, time-dependent networks of candidates, their campaign teams, supporters, NGOs, formal and informal activist organizations, the general public and the technology itself, which we consider to be a sovereign and crucial subject of political communication. Their mutual relations and information exchanges are manifested through retweets, reciprocal following, hashtag campaigns, frequent keywords, shared multimedia content and other elements of social network environment.

The ongoing study is based on the concept of connective action (as defined by Bennett & Segerberg) and on the general technocentric approach to communication studies. The preliminary results show an emerging typology of campaign strategies, from formal, centralized and rigid campaigns on one side through various hybrid overlaps of traditional and new "activist" forms of communication to the personalized, networked and unregulated campaign "buzz" on the other side. Nevertheless, is digital cleverness and dexterity really the main condition for victory?

Title: Echo Chambers By Design: Citizen Debate on Politicians' Facebook Pages

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Abstract

This paper studies what kind of political debate is afforded on the Facebook pages of politicians, and how the debate on these pages is constrained by the architecture of Facebook as well as by the dominant political view of the particular page. A case study is presented based on: 1) data collected from Facebook pages of nine top Danish politicians, one from each party competing during the Danish national election campaign of 2011, and 2) four focus groups interviews with a selection of citizens who posted comments to one of the politicians' Facebook pages.

Gillespie argues that social media platforms are highly politicized and we need to consider the organizations behind social media as political *curators* of the platforms they provide (Gillespie, 2010). In line with this argument van Dijck analyzes how commercial interests shape our identity performance and social interaction on particularly platforms like Facebook (2013a; 2013b). The study further examines how Facebook pages, the public 'face' of the platform, introduce new issues as the page owners curate the debate and influence content directly by censorship and indirectly by political association and fan mentality.

In order to study the activity and debates of Facebook users, ITU designed a Facebook crawler that collects data from Facebook pages, including updates, likes and comments. During the election campaign the nine politicians posted 612 updates leading to approx. 18.000 unique users posting approx. 35.000 comments. The data was gathered using theoretical sampling and analyzed using Habermas' theory of the public sphere ([1962] 1992),
Chantal Mouffe's theory of agonistic pluralism (1999) and Sunstein's theory of Echo Chambers (2009). Also, in order to discuss perceived affordances and constraints (Gibson in: Shaw & Bransford, 1977; Grint and Woolgar, 1997; Hutchby, 2001) of this engagement, four focus group interviews were conducted with Facebook users who engaged in the comment section.

Early results suggest that the comment section of the 9 top politician pages afford a very particular type of political debate, which leaves little room for outsider critique. The page owners and moderators actively delete many comments, though commentators often

criticize the act and motives for censorship. Furthermore, on each page, a fan mentality complicates critical discussions with "outsiders". It is argued that Facebook pages of politicians are not just a restricted form of political debate but that they are *echo chambers by design.* Researchers and journalists are encouraged to consider this, when looking to Facebook pages for public opinion.