

Title: Talking with the “Tweetocracy”: A qualitative study of Norwegian political micro-bloggers

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Abstract

Twitter is often described as the social media that is most suited for political debate. At the same time, Twitter- use is more divided than other, traditional forms of political participation. In Norway the press has coined the phrase “Tweetocracy”, describing the well-established voices from media, politics and academia using Twitter as the coffeehouses of the 21st century. This study explores how political micro-bloggers perceive the rules and resources of political and civic debate on Twitter. By focusing on rhetorical dimensions it brings new perspectives to the predominantly quantitative approaches in social media research. The paper presents the findings from 15 semi-structured in-depth interviews (1h) with active political micro-bloggers. The informants have been selected using a snowball-method, having the interviewees identifying new key informants. The 15 informants are political pundits, journalists, academics and laymen from different sides of the political spectre.

The interviews are structured around four main categories: *perceived affordances*, *roles and relations*, *discursive schemes*, and *social norms*. Across political and professional differences the interviewees express a common understanding of themselves as the “chattering class”, indicating the recognition of a particular public within Twitter with its own rules and resources. This is explicitly described as an elitist milieu engaged in political and civic debate through a more advanced form of deliberation than other areas of the public sphere. In their own narratives the interviewees adhere to a classic ideal of political deliberation based on rational, disinterested argumentation. The interviewees claim that they mainly interact with people with opposing opinions, that they sanction *ad hominem* arguments, break off stale debates etc. This rhetorical ideal is clearly contrary to the most critical perspectives on Internet debate. At the same time the interviewees describe a distinct form of irony and humour that characterizes Twitter. Wit and sharpness is a rhetorical ideal, for some perhaps the most important. The largely ironic tone assumes a high degree of implied and hidden knowledge, which strengthens the impression of a particular, demarcated public sphere.

The findings give valuable insight to our understanding of micro-blogging as deliberative arena. In particular it is an example of how different media can form publics with their own discourse norms. The case of the Norwegian political Twitter-sphere also shows the relevance of rhetoric to understand how new media transforms political communication and the public sphere

Title: The multilevel impact of the Internet on public opinion, the media and the political system. The case study of the re-election of the President of the Italian Republic Giorgio Napolitano.

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Abstract

In April 2013 the elections of the President of the Republic took place in Italy. Reflecting on these elections, television news and newspapers announced that a new phase of direct democracy by the Internet had started in Italy. Of course this wasn't true, but the election of Giorgio Napolitano is a perfect case study of several phenomena connected to the Internet, and of the uprising of what has been defined "a new hybrid news system" (Chadwick 2011). What does this mean? First, it refers to how citizens engage in politics and the rise of new forms of political participation (Beck 1997, Bennet 2008 ; Bentivegna 2006; Dahlgren 2009; Rosanvallon 2008). Second, it shows how television and newspapers look at the Internet phenomenon and the central role of the net in accelerating the timing of information (Bennet, Entman 2001; Mazzoleni, Schulz 1999). Finally, it focuses on the uses of the Internet by parties and politicians and the consequences of the new net-arena on traditional forms of political representation; (Crouch 2004; Dayan, Katz 1992; Manin 1997; Revelli 2013; Jeffrey 2005).

This research is based on the analysis and cross-comparison of the media coverage, the different uses of the Internet - social media, mail bombing, on line petitions, hacker attacks, online elections- the interaction between the actors of the public arena and new non elite actors. Qualitative analysis is combined with quantitative data about the use of Facebook and Twitter by politicians and citizens between April 1 – 30, 2013. At all three levels analyzed – citizens-activists, media system, political system - the Internet marked profound changes in the mechanisms of political participation and information, impact the course of events on multiple levels, as well as coverage by mainstream media. The weaknesses of the political system and its main actors were amplified by new uses of the Internet as an instrument of pressure from below. The coverage of mainstream media was hybridized and influenced by the flow of information produced on the Internet. The election of Giorgio Napolitano was

“decisively shaped by mediated interactions among politicians, professional journalists, bloggers and citizen activists organized on the social network” (Chadwick) as well as political institutions, old and new media, non elite actors. In Italy many traits of what has been called a Hybrid News System can still be observed.

Title: “Would you like to set the agenda?”: Engagement with political news across media

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Abstract

In a current media landscape where large parts of the population in developed countries have ubiquitous access (through e.g. mobile devices) to a multitude of media it becomes even more important to attend to how people combine and configure these media throughout their everyday life (Couldry, 2012). This presentation addresses this issue by asking how individuals engage with political news across media. A wide definition of engagement is used in this context to include the various communicative practices (Craig 1989) that pertains to the discussion of politics in private, semi-private as well as public spaces. Critical engagement with politics is often portrayed as both a requirement for a well-functioning democracy (Walsh, 2004) and as a source of increased civic participation (Norris, 2012). Furthermore, the use and discussion of news can be seen as an essential part of the ongoing opinion formation (Gamson, 1992) and ‘performance of identity’ (Madianou, 2009) that takes place throughout people’s everyday life. To get more knowledge about these processes it is important to attend to how users engage – or disengage – with political news.

The presentation discusses engagement with political news on the backdrop of a cluster analysis of types of news users across media made from a quantitative survey among adult Danes (n=1205) as well as findings from a series of qualitative interviews investigating the motivations for engaging with political news. This empirical material will both shed light on a) which individuals that are more likely to engage in the various communicative practices and b) in which situations people feel comfortable in discussing political issues.

The presentation also advances a specific theoretical agenda for studying media use in the 21st century. By studying the communicative practices related to one particular medium in the context of the range of alternative media available to the individual we can get a better understanding on the way media are used in an age of ‘polymedia’ (Madianou & Miller 2012). How is talking about politics for instance on Facebook different to political discussions on other platforms online (e.g. on news sites and blogs) or conversations face-to-face? On which media platforms and with whom is it appropriate to discuss politics? In short: who is willing to try to set the agenda when?

Title: The Structure of Political Networks on Twitter in National and International Contexts

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Abstract

In many European countries, both ‘casual’ citizens and political actors including politicians, activists, lobbyists, experts and journalists use Twitter to exchange information and engage in conversations on current political affairs. Those communication flows are primarily structured by the individual choices users make in ‘following’ certain accounts, and the subsequent position of the user within the greater network of ‘follower’ connections. Those choices imply an interest in the accounts’ messages, and clusters within those networks may represent common interests among subgroups of users. In a national political context, users might cluster around ideological positions and party affiliations, hence mirroring the political party landscape of the respective country. In an international political context users might primarily or additionally be segmented alongside countries and/or languages.

We tested the assumptions for the national context in the run up to Austria’s federal elections 2013, and are preparing a similar study for an international case—the European Parliament elections to be held in May. In the Austrian case, we collected Tweets with a reference to Austrian parliamentary parties in a seven-months period (N=149,691) sent by 11,776 users. We identified 1,852 top users (<10 Tweets), retrieved their follower connections from Twitter’s REST API, constructed the respective follower network and performed a cluster analyses (algorithm ‘walk trap). We then analyzed the descriptions of the respective users for similarities that would reveal the cluster’s character and coded for political affiliations.

The analyses revealed eleven major communities (<1% of total accounts), six of which showed a distinct political orientation and were positioned in the periphery of the network. The structure of the Twitter network partly mirrored the political landscape, because three of those clusters clearly related to the largest of the six Austrian parliamentary parties and two others to smaller extra-parliamentary parties. A centre consisting of a large ‘journalism’ largely connected the ideologically fragmented periphery of the Austrian political Twitter-sphere and an even larger ‘civil society’ cluster that included activists, experts and politically

unaffiliated citizens. While the centrality of journalism was no surprise given its general relevance for public communication flows, the analyses showed that Twitter also provides chances for 'new' civil society actors to become hubs within networks of political communication. We are already monitoring distinct keywords for the EP elections case and will perform a comparable study. We present both studies, allowing for comprehensive insights into the construction of spaces of political communication on Twitter.