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Birds of a feather flock together? Party leaders on Twitter during the 2013 Norwegian elections

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Abstract

The advent of social media has spurred democratic optimism and been seen as something that help political public relations establish and maintain good relationships with key publics. Still, research has shown how, for instance, political candidates in the United States by large did not respond to messages on their Facebook walls. Another popular social media platform, Twitter, has often been deemed as an elite medium, thus reducing its democratic potential. The findings in this study show a different picture. Most of the politicians in the sample do use Twitter and its @ message functionality. Furthermore, the extent to which they communicate with ordinary citizens is larger than expected. Still, it is a clear tendency that the exchanges are found in user clusters with little overlap between them. The researched party leaders mostly approach other Twitter users in unique clusters. Thus, Twitter probably functions to maintain good relationships with, literarily, followers. As Norwegian party leaders use the @message functionality more frequently than before – especially to engage in communication with citizens – maybe we are seeing a shift in how political actors engage in online interactivity.

Keywords

Elections, Norway, political communication, Twitter

Introduction

Ever since the increased accessibility and popularity of the Internet in the mid-1990s, claims have been made regarding the supposed possibilities for improved interaction between citizens and politicians – particularly those on the campaign trail. By using a

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variety of online services, politicians would be able to more efficiently manage their strategic communication efforts, making time for contact and interaction with 'regular' voters a real possibility (Davis, 2010; Sanders, 2009). The advent of social media has fuelled this optimism further, and the successful 2008 Obama campaign for the US presidency is often pointed to as a prominent example (Kushin and Yamamoto, 2010). Given their potential for interactivity, social media such as Facebook or Twitter could indeed carry important democratic functions, going beyond campaign purposes in promoting participatory and transparent governments (Avery and Graham, 2013; Waters and Williams, 2011). In short, it has been argued that such services could bolster the democratic system. Such optimistic scenarios, however, have largely been dispelled by empirical research (Davis, 2010; Sanders, 2009). In general, scholarship has suggested that high-end political actors have employed various online services in a broadcasting fashion, largely overlooking the potential for interactivity supposedly inherent in the Internet and its offshoots (Larsson, 2013).

That being said, there are good reasons to take yet another look at the uses of social media at the hands of politicians. First, most of the published research on these matters has been conducted in US or UK contexts (as suggested by Hermans and Vergeer, 2012; Lilleker and Malagón, 2010). Could other patterns be discerned in a country characterised by different sizes and different political cultures? Second, and just as important, the situation is not static – many actors are still coming to grips with suitable uses of social media for political purposes, and relatively little work has been performed looking into politicians' use of the specific service studied here – Twitter (see Karpf, 2012). Hence, in this study we will focus on politicians' use of Twitter in a small Western democracy – Norway. Featuring a party-centred rather than a candidate-centred system (see, for example, Arter, 1999), high levels of Internet use as well as high turnouts at the voting booths (Karlsen, 2009), we argue that findings from Norway provide a useful contrast to the studies already available. With this in mind, our research question reads as follows: *How do Norwegian party leaders utilise Twitter in their election campaigns and which publics do the politicians prioritise to engage with?*

We assess the communication efforts undertaken by the leaders of the seven main Norwegian political parties on Twitter in a month-long period leading up to the parliamentary elections 2013. A specific focus is placed on providing overarching, structural insights regarding the degree to which the studied party leaders make use of the Twitter platform to interact with other users through the @message functionality. The latter targets a particular Twitter account and we use this as one specific indicator for interaction between politicians and individuals. While politicians received hundreds of such messages during the specified time period, the emphasis here is on the users that the party leaders themselves choose to enter into dialogue with – societal elites, such as other politicians and media professionals – or ordinary citizens. Based on empirical results regarding the online practices of high-end Norwegian politicians, this article helps inform the discussion about the suggested parliamentarian-political potential of social media as mentioned above.

Politicians online – Broadcasting or communicating?

The notion of technological innovations as agents of change would appear to lie deep in our understanding of political communication and marketing, almost mirroring tendencies

towards technological determinism (e.g. Nilsson and Carlsson, 2013; Webster, 2002). As much research on the uses of novel communication technologies has emanated from US presidential elections, notable examples can be found here (e.g. Kushin and Yamamoto, 2010; Sweetser, 2011). Jones (1964) has shown that as far back as the 1896, election technology in the form of telephones played an important and integral part of campaign marketing efforts. By way of Roosevelt's 'great radio voice' (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944) and Kennedy's command of the television medium (Selnow, 1998; Tichenor et al., 1970), the current situation in much of the Western world emphasises the uses of online platforms by politicians. While television consistently is singled out as the most important media platform (Lilleker and Jackson, 2010; Towner, 2013), the Internet is arguably increasing its importance for politicians who seek office.

Williams and Gulati (2012) have correctly pointed out that political campaign web sites have become 'a standard communication and fundraising tool' (pp. 52–53). Still, how politicians employ interactivity, one of the defining characteristics of the Internet, has been subject of much debate. Interactivity is a manifold concept, understood and operationalised in different ways in different contexts (e.g. Bucy, 2004). As our focus here lay on the conversational possibilities associated with Twitter through @messaging, we understand the concept as *human* (Stromer-Galley, 2000) or *user-to-user* (McMillan, 2002) interactivity. As the labels would imply, such a focus takes special interest in interpersonal uses of online technologies (e.g. Massey and Leavy, 1999), such as Twitter. While these conceptualisations of interactivity do indeed stem from applications of the Internet not specifically related to Twitter, our basic interest here is the digital conversation. As @messaging is arguably the Twitter functionality most clearly related to conversation between users, we deem this theoretical focus as the most suitable to our topic.

While research works on earlier online political presences have suggested that they were little more than 'electronic brochures' (Druckman et al., 2007: 427), the previously mentioned 2008 Obama campaign for the US presidency supposedly made extensive use of interactive features, effectively moving from what could be called a *broadcasting* rationale to one more focused on *communicating*. While broadcasting practices – essentially sending out messages in a more or less straightforward marketing fashion – have been part of political campaigning for decades, the influx of social media like Twitter has been thought of as having the potential for two-way communication (e.g. Larsson, 2013; Graham et al., 2013). Besides the novelty factor, politicians adopting Twitter in this way might have more to gain, as experimental research has shown that engagement with voters on the Internet leads to positive evaluations of politicians (e.g. Grant et al., 2010; Utz, 2009; Vergeer and Hermans, 2013). A 'regime of immediacy' (Rosanvallon, 2011) has been ushered in with the help of online media. More importantly, several scholars argue that social media interactivity can bolster political engagement among various citizenries (e.g. Avery and Graham, 2013; Waters and Williams, 2011). Optimists have pointed to the potential for citizens to engage and 'play a role in the development of new democratic politics' (Dahlgren, 2005: 160). Still, empirical research has concluded that most users gravitate towards other material (Sanders, 2009). In fact, it has been argued that the technology can increase the distance between the elite and the unengaged, by giving the former an additional tool for communication among themselves (Davis, 2010).

Table 1. Characteristics of Norwegian political parties.

Norwegian parties (abbreviation)	Party leader	% votes in 2009 parliamentary elections	Ideological position
Large (10%+)			
Labour Party (Ap)	Jens Stoltenberg	35.3	Left
Progress Party (Frp)	Siv Jensen	22.9	Populist Right
Conservative Party (H)	Erna Solberg	17.1	Right
Medium (4–9.9%)			
Socialist Left Party (Sv)	Audun Lysbakken	6.1	Left
Centre Party (Sp)	Liv Signe Navarsete	6.2	Centre
Christian Democrats (Krf)	Knut Arild Hareide	5.7	Centre
Small (<3.9%)			
Liberal Party (V)	Trine Skei Grande	3.7	Centre

While Honeycutt and Herring (2009) suggest that micro blogging has become 'more conversational and collaborative' (p. 10), this does not necessarily hold true with regard to politicians. While variations have been found regarding party size, incumbency or ideological factors (Graham et al., 2013; Larsson and Kalsnes, 2014), early scholarship on the topic has mostly indicated the use of the broadcasting variety. For instance, politicians have apparently employed Twitter mostly for practices like self-promotion (Golbeck et al., 2010), impression management (Jackson and Lilleker, 2011), information dissemination (Sæbø, 2011; Small, 2011) and party mobilisation (Dang-Xuan et al., 2013).

However, more recent findings from the 2011 Norwegian regional elections found that nearly half (44%) of all tweets sent by the sampled politicians were classified as @ messages. By focusing on the subsequent 2013 national elections, this study offers further insight into the Norwegian case. Given Norway's leading role regarding Internet penetration rates (e.g. Karlsen, 2011), these insights should be of interest in an international perspective.

The Norwegian political system

Perhaps easiest described as one of the Nordic welfare states (Hilson, 2008), Norway features 4.9 million inhabitants represented by 169 politicians in the national parliament, Stortinget. The parliamentary system has been characterised as moderate pluralistic (Sartori, 1990), featuring multiple parties and limited centrifugal forces. While individual politicians have been known to play significant parts in the Norwegian context, the political system is best described as party-centred rather than candidate-centred (Enli and Skogerbø, 2013; Karlsen, 2009). Table 1 presents the basic characteristics of the main political parties in Norway, including results from the 2009 national election – the latest election to have taken place when the data for this article were collected. The analysis that follows will point to the factors in Table 1, such as size and political orientation, when discussing the research question.

Method

With the research question in mind, all tweets sent to and from the accounts of the leaders of the seven main Norwegian political parties during the month before the parliamentary elections in September 2013 were archived. In order to avoid non-official or fake Twitter profiles, the official Twitter accounts of the party leaders were accessed via the respective party web sites (e.g. Klinger, 2013). Tweets sent from these seven accounts were archived starting in 9 August 2013 and ending a month later in 10 September 2013 – effectively capturing the activity undertaken during the supposedly highly intensive 'short campaign' period (Enli and Skogerbø, 2013). This resulted in a total of 846 tweets, sent from the party leader's accounts to a total of 518 other users. Collection was undertaken by means of the yourTwapperKeeper service – a self-hosted Twitter archiving service that utilises Twitter's Stream and Search application programming interfaces (API) in tandem. As pointed out by Bruns and Stieglitz (2012), any research dealing with Twitter data must take into account 'the vagaries of working with the Twitter API' (p. 179). Specifically, as the publicly available API gives access to about 1% of the total amount of tweets posted at any given moment, researchers must show some caution when seeking to generalise (Morstatter et al., 2013). Our current interest merited a comparably regulated approach to data collection, tracking seven accounts for 1 month. With such a comparably small project, resulting in 846 tweets, the method was deemed suitable. Manual checks on each party leader's account page verified this claim.

Once collected, the data were analysed using a series of primarily quantitative methods. In the first instance, the type of Twitter message was characterised as belonging in one of the three categories: (1) retweet (where a message sent by another user is redistributed), (2) undirected Tweet (messages sent to an undisclosed audience of followers) or (3) an @message (where the @ sign is employed in order to contact another specified user). This is a relatively simple operation as the data received from the your Twapper Keeper service can be sorted to identify tweets accordingly.

SPSS was then used to perform a series of descriptive statistical analyses, presented in Figures 1 and 3. For the network analysis presented in Figure 2, the open-source software package Gephi was utilised to depict the conversational networks of our studied party leaders (for more on Gephi, please refer to Bastian et al., 2009). Specifically, data regarding @messages sent from party leaders to different users were entered into Gephi and manipulated with the *Force Atlas* algorithm as described by Bruns (2011).

The next step was to look closer at the types of users the politicians responded to with their @messages. We visited the 518 Twitter accounts that were identified and looked at their own descriptions of their profile. We then employed a typology inspired by the work of Ausserhofer and Maireder (2013) placing the Twitter users in one of four categories:

1. Citizen: anonymous and/or non-professional/private citizen;
2. Media professionals: professional communicators, journalists or public relations (PR)/marketing practitioners;
3. Organisational representative: representatives of companies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), unions or lobbying/interest groups;
4. Politician: active or former representatives at any level of government; members of political parties, or employees of political parties.

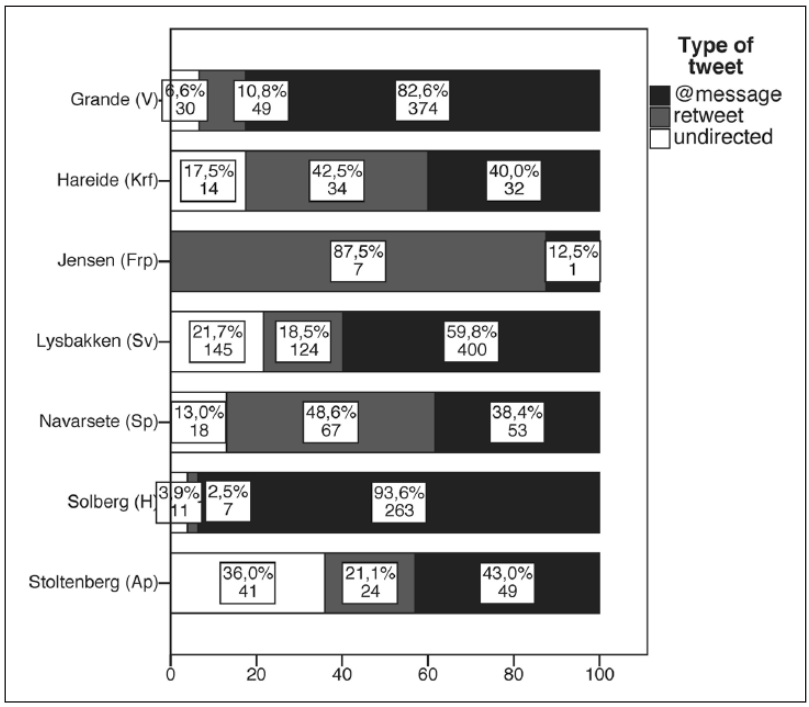

Figure 1. Distribution of types of tweets sent by party leaders.
Total *N* for Grande: 453, Hareide: 80, Jensen: 8, Lysbakken: 669, Navarsete: 138, Solberg: 281 and Stoltenberg: 114.

While the genuineness of party leader accounts could be verified as described previously, our assessments of the users they chose to communicate with faced different challenges. We cannot be absolutely certain that these users really are who they say they are on their Twitter profile pages. Nevertheless, we argue that it is of interest to gauge the degree to which the party leaders engage with users who at least claim to have certain affiliations, professional claims or other characteristics.

Indeed, the argument is made here that by dividing users into broad, yet distinct groups ('elite' and 'non-elite'), we are able to distinguish to what degree the party leaders engage with 'the established political commentariat of professionals engaged in political debate' (Bruns and Highfield, 2013: 672) – and to what degree they choose to communicate on Twitter with 'non-elite' citizens.

Inter-coder reliability regarding these categories was assessed by having the first author code all identified 518 accounts. A research assistant subsequently re-coded a random 10% sample of the full data set. Employing Krippendorff's α (Krippendorff, 2008; Lombard et al., 2002), specifically the macro constructed for SPSS (Hayes and Krippendorff, 2007), α measured reliability at .69, which is sufficient for a conservative measurement like the one used.

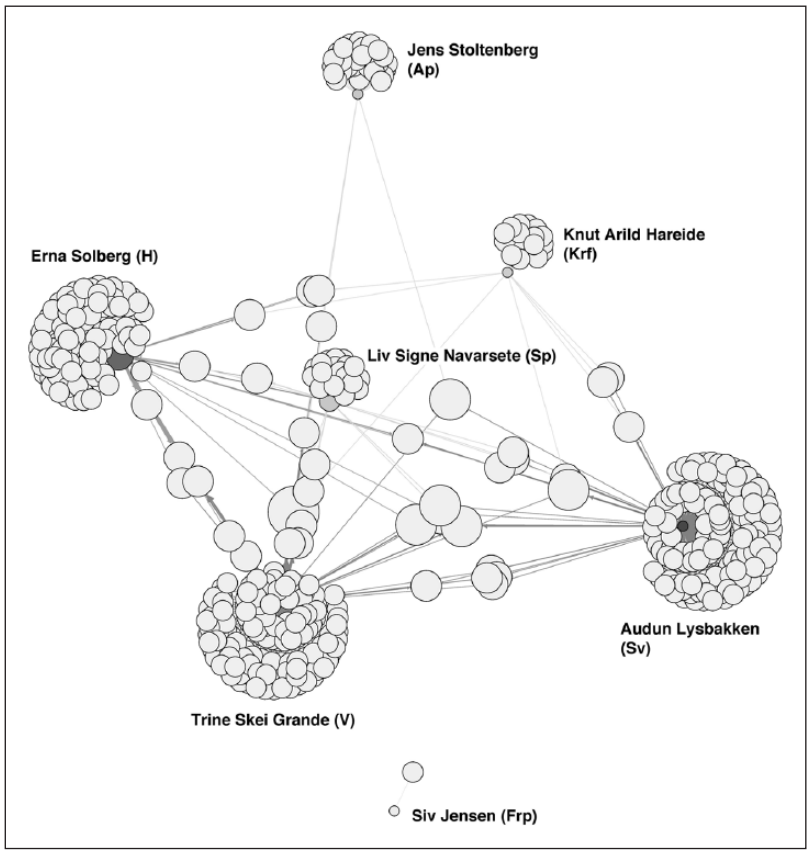

Figure 2. Network graph of @messages sent from party leaders to recipients (users other than party leaders have been anonymised).

Results and discussion

The Twitter activities of the seven party leaders provided some variation throughout our period of study. Figure 1 provides an overview of the types of tweets sent by each politician, effectively allowing us to single out those who tended towards a more heavy use of the @message functionality – and those who mainly chose usage of other modes. While not of specific interest for our current purposes, the distributions of retweets and undirected messages are displayed as well – in order to provide the full picture of the activities undertaken by the politicians.

While considerable differences can be noted regarding the Twitter practices of each individual politician, Figure 1 clearly indicates that the Norwegian party leaders for the most part made extensive use of @messages in order to communicate with other users during the 4 weeks leading up to the 2014 parliamentary elections. As the black portions of the bars visible in Figure 1 indicate, this is especially valid for three of the studied

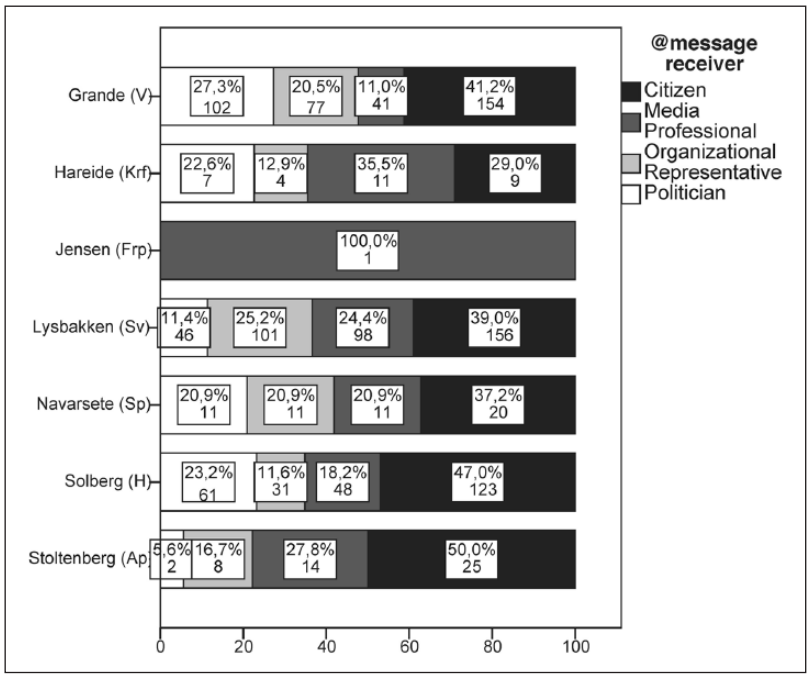

Figure 3. @messages sent from party leaders to different user groups.
Total *N* for Grande: 374, Hareide: 32, Jensen: 1, Lysbakken: 400, Navarsete: 53, Solberg: 263 and Stoltenberg: 49.

politicians (Audun Lysbakken, Trine Skei Grande and Erna Solberg), who also made comparably extensive overall use of Twitter. While previous research has indicated that the different uses vary according to characteristics like party size (Vergeer et al., 2011b) or incumbency (Gulati and Williams, 2013), still differences pertaining to ideological perspectives appear to have diminished in later years (Klinger, 2013; Vergeer and Hermans, 2013), signalling a levelling of the playing field between different types of parties. Some of the differences visible in Figure 1 can perhaps be related to party size, as both Lysbakken and Grande are leaders of two of the smaller parties holding seats in the Norwegian parliament. The comparably smaller party sizes could serve as an explanatory factor for the large amount of activity. As suggested by Gibson and McAllister (2014), such smaller actors who 'lack access to mainstream news outlets' (p. 3) can employ social media as a remedy, presumably gaining the interest of journalists. In sum, while neither of the two parties under discussion here could be understood as on the 'fringe' of mainstream Norwegian politics, the size argument as proposed earlier would appear to have at least some effect in this context too. Conversely, this finding could be seen as unexpected given that the larger political parties put together Twitter teams to assist their political leaders and could be expected to outnumber leaders from the less resourceful parties.

Another interpretation of these data would involve demographical factors. Although Lysbakken and Grande can be safely placed on each side of a left–right ideological

divide, their respective parties largely appeal to similar voter groups – urban and highly educated. As similar tendencies can be discerned among Twitter users in general research (Larsson and Moe, 2013; Bruns and Highfield, 2013), we should perhaps not be to surprised at the level of engagement shown by these politicians illustrated in Figure 1. Conversely, Siv Jensen and the Progress Party (Frp) find their most devoted supporters among non-urban, lower educated voters. Indeed, her account was the least active during the studied time period – a finding that makes sense given Jensen's apparent strategy to largely avoid Twitter and its urban elite 'Twitterati', focusing her activity instead on the arguably more popular and broad-reaching Facebook platform.

In sum, then, when comparing the data presented in Figure 1 to previous, similar research efforts (Larsson and Kalsnes, 2014), the degrees to which the party leaders use Twitter in order to communicate with other users are noticeable. However, in order to provide a more detailed picture of these practices, we need to take who is actually being engaged with into account. A starting point for doing so is presented in Figure 2, featuring a network graph representing the Twitter relationships between the politicians and their conversation partners.

The graph presented in Figure 2 features a series of interconnected nodes, representing the party leaders (identified in the figure) and their respective conversation partners, who have been anonymised here. The size of each node is dependent on the number of @messages received – the bigger the node, the more messages were received during the specified time period. Conversely, the shade of the node indicates the number of @messages sent, with relatively darker nodes representing users more active in this regard. Lines between nodes indicate @messages sent, where thicker lines represent more communication having taken place.

With these guidelines for interpretation in place, nodes representing party leaders can be discerned in the middle of a series of clusters that make up the bulk of Figure 2. For example, the lower right-hand side of the figure finds the node and surrounding cluster resulting from the @message activity undertaken by Audun Lysbakken, while the leftmost lower cluster represents the tweets sent by Trine Skei Grande. In the middle of Figure 2, Liv Signe Navarsete can be found, while the three clusters above her representation depict the activities undertaken by Knut Arild Hareide, Jens Stoltenberg and Erna Solberg. Finally, the comparably limited activity visible at the very bottom of the graph was undertaken by Siv Jensen. It is perhaps noteworthy that the node and cluster for the centre party leader are indeed placed at the very centre of the graph, while the depiction of Siv Jensen is placed in a somewhat isolated position – save from one tweet sent by Jensen to aft_politikk (political journalism department at the Aftenposten national newspaper), she did not use the @message functionality at all during the studied time period, as mentioned previously.

Finally, while all the nodes corresponding to each identified party leader are all depicted in Figure 2 with their own cluster of unique communication partners, a series of nodes are also visible in between these groupings, apparently showing no or weak relation to any specific party leaders. This would indicate that while each party leader has a clear set of users with which only he communicates, we can also discern a series of users who are approached by more than one of the party leaders. Focusing on these 'in-between' users, we can see that certain nodes are comparably larger than others

Table 2. Classification of Twitter users approached by party leaders.

User group	*N* (%) of all users	*N* (%) of users outside of clusters	*N* (%) of messages received by users
Citizen	240 (46.3)	13 (34)	351 (41.6)
Media professional	94 (18.1)	11 (29)	158 (18.7)
Organisational representative	93 (18)	6 (15)	165 (19.5)
Politician	91 (17.6)	8 (22)	172 (20.3)
Total	518 (100)	38 (100)	846 (100)

– indicating higher amounts of @message sent to them from the party leaders. Indeed, we can discern that different types of users, classified in our analysis as Politicians, Organisational representatives, Media professionals and Citizens, are enjoying plenty of attention in this regard. Still, we need to take the whole corpus of party leader's @message partners into account in order to provide a fuller picture with whom they choose to communicate. Table 2 provides a classification of the 518 identified accounts according to the four categories detailed in the 'Method' section.

Perhaps the most striking finding presented in Table 2 is that almost half of the users (46%) belong in the citizen category. They received close to 42% of all the @messages, while the other categories (media professionals, organisational representative and politicians) received almost 20% each. While previous research (Ausserhofer and Maireder, 2013; Larsson and Moe, 2013; Bruns and Highfield, 2013) has largely suggested Twitter to be an online space for societal elites to schmooze and discuss in an informal manner, results from the 2013 Norwegian election would seem to challenge such preconceptions. This finding holds partially true also for the subset of users found outside of each party leader cluster – as the third column from the left of Table 2 would suggest, these users still self-present as citizens, while groupings of media professionals and politicians are found to be more frequent here than for the entire corpus of users.

In sum, while the overall picture as presented in Table 2 would suggest a more citizen-centric approach in the @message practices of party leaders, we need to assess whether any individual differences between the party leaders can be found regarding how they approach different user groups on Twitter. An overview of tweets sent from the party leaders to the different user groups is shown in Figure 3.

Judging from the comparably large black portions of the bars presented in Figure 3, representing the number of citizens who were contacted by the politicians, this would indicate that the overarching tendency introduced in Table 2 largely holds true also if these data are assessed on the level of each individual party leader. As such, the recipients of these messages largely follow a familiar pattern across our studied party leaders. As briefly discussed earlier, while earlier research tended to report on more progressive or novel online practices as associated primarily with politicians to the left of the ideological spectrum (e.g. Lilleker and Malagón, 2010; Vaccari, 2008a, 2008b), more recent results have indicated a diminished influence of political persuasion (e.g. Vergeer and Hermans, 2013). The data presented here, then, do indeed suggest a pattern of what has been referred to as 'deideologisation' in this regard (Schweitzer, 2008).

Conclusion

While previous empirical studies of politicians' Internet use have largely found that a one-way broadcasting rationale seems to be the norm (Larsson, 2013), the results presented here suggest otherwise. The Twitter use of the seven studied Norwegian party leaders exhibits clear tendencies towards more communicative uses. Indeed, @messages – a Twitter messaging rationale signalling discussion between users of the service – proved to be the most common type of tweet sent by the majority of party leaders during the month-long period leading up to the 2013 national election. Future, comparative research should be helpful in assessing the robustness of these results.

While the presence of such communicative tendencies is of interest, we must not lose sight of some of the details presented above which serve to nuance some of the conclusions. With regard to the network graph presented in Figure 2, the size of the nodes indicates that while @messages are indeed being sent from the party leaders to other users, these chains of communication tend not to go on for very long. As suggested by the relatively smaller sizes of the recipient nodes, most of these interactions are over after one or two exchanges. While certain users appear to receive more messages – sometimes also from more than one party leader – the bulk of interactions must be described as rather abrupt. Indeed, this has perhaps partly to do with the nature of interacting on Twitter, but still says something about the way in which party leaders have approached the platform. Then again, Twitter conversations might not necessarily have to be long and on-going. As suggested by Vergeer et al. (2011a), such short chains of interaction might prove beneficial from a marketing standpoint, as they can serve to decrease the psychological distance between the politician and the potential voter. As such, this variety of use might be deemed suitable for a politician on the campaign trail – as was the case here – but perhaps less so if one considers these practices from a standpoint of long-lasting political discourse exchanges.

Moreover, while the conversations charted in the figures and tables above do not appear to last long, it would appear that they mostly take place in clusters characterised by homophily – meaning that party leaders tend to enter into conversation with unique clusters of users, and that there is little overlap between these groups. Besides the clusters, we might suspect that the users positioned outside of these clusters, clearly visible in Figure 2, would feature higher concentrations of media professionals, organisational representatives or indeed other politicians. Analysis of a subset of these users proved that such suspicions were partly wrong, as the distribution largely exhibited the same characteristics as reported for all recipients of @messages. Nevertheless, the fact that both media professionals – such as national political journalists – and politicians – such as former party leaders or ministers of state – were slightly over-represented in the subset does say something about the priorities of the party leaders.

Taken together, then, our results indicate a mixed verdict on social media use in political public relations and its democratic potential. Social media does provide an important way to communicate strategically with key constituents, much like demonstrated in other studies (e.g. Kushin and Yamamoto, 2010). The comparably high level of interaction on behalf of the politicians was surprising in comparison with the results reported in other, similar studies (Golbeck et al., 2010; Sæbø, 2011; Small, 2011). Still, it could be argued

that since most of the exchanges take place within certain clusters that do not overlap, the political potential of social media is only partially fulfilled, that is, if social media is thought to contribute to a *wider* public sphere – the virtual space where people interact to exchange ideas, information, attitudes and opinions (Dahlgren, 2005; Habermas, 1989; Mckee, 2005). In a well-functioning public sphere, debates would *also* be had with those outside your own camp. The results from this study, however, indicate that the Twitter exchanges first and foremost take place within limited clusters. In one sense then, it could be argued that the findings strengthen the idea of the existence of echo chambers, of actors seeking together to have their views reinforced with the assistance of like-minded actors. The researched party leaders have their own clusters of users they choose to communicate with, including some citizens. Thus, Twitter probably functions to maintain good relationships with, literarily, followers. As pointed out by Davis (2010), online politics of this type may encourage a trend where 'tightly linked, cross-referencing and self-regarding' networks alienate others (p. 113). Viewed differently, however, the Twitter exchanges could also be seen as serving as inter-group honing of political arguments before taking part in the wider political discussion. Twitter is, after all, just one of several public spheres where politics is discussed. Still, however, given our limited focus on interactivity, we have no data on the particular content of the Tweets.

While this study has provided important insights into the Twitter practices of high-level politicians, the employed design has certain limitations that should be addressed. First, while there is an apparent dearth of research looking into these specific uses (Vergeer et al., 2011b), future research should attempt to apply a multi-modal approach, gauging the activities of politicians on multiple platforms (Kim et al., 2013; Vergeer and Hermans, 2013). Facebook comes to mind here, but researchers should also be sensitive to other, possibly regional platforms employed for these purposes. Second, the choice to study the 'short campaign' period can be motivated by the comparably large amount of activity to be expected from the politicians. While such studies are undoubtedly important in order to further our knowledge of electoral campaigning in an evolving digital environment, interested researchers should also focus on the characteristics of these uses in non-election time periods – possibly uncovering traces of supposed permanent campaigning (Blumenthal, 1980; Elmer et al., 2012). Third, future research could broaden the sample to include other politicians than party leaders. Findings from both Norway and Sweden have indicated that 'underdog' politicians make comparably more use of services like the one under scrutiny here (Larsson and Kalsnes, 2014). Fourth, while the tweets studied here emanated from accounts seemingly operated by the party leaders themselves, some of the messages were most likely composed by staffers or communication professionals. Much like the rise of television carried with it an increased reliance on public relations consultants and professionals (e.g. Gibson et al., 2008), we can expect that the digital era has brought about a similar development regarding social media use. Future scholarship should try to assess this practice and the influence these practitioners appear to have on political activity. Fifth, the analyses provided here focused exclusively on the structure of communication as undertaken by party leaders. Future research might find it interesting to complement the insights provided here with more in-depth qualitative analysis of the issues brought up for discussion, and the length of the conversations around these (see Adi et al.,

2014) – and what particular communication strategies party leaders employ when addressing different types of audiences. While dialogue is premised on some kind of exchange taking place between two parties, it cannot be reduced to interactional functionality like an @message. Sixth, and finally, the focus on @messages was merited based on their importance for interacting and communicating on Twitter. However, retweeting – the redistribution of messages originally sent by another user – could serve as an interesting topic for future research regarding politicians' interactions with citizens on Twitter. As such, interested scholars are urged to take such functionalities into account when approaching research topics like these in the future.

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