

Online social networks and micro-blogging in political campaigning: The exploration of a new campaign tool and a new campaign style

Party Politics
19(3) 477–501
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sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/1354068811407580
ppq.sagepub.com


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Abstract

This study explores how candidates running for the European Parliament (EP) in 2009 used micro-blogging and online social networks – in this case Twitter (www.twitter.com) in the early stage of its adoption – to communicate and connect with citizens. Micro-blogging in general, and Twitter in particular, is one of the new and popular Web 2.0 applications, yet there has been little research focusing on the use of Twitter by politicians. After reviewing different types of campaigning strategies and introducing a new and distinct strategy, this descriptive and exploratory study focuses on political candidates' use of micro-blogging and online social networking (i.e. Twitter) from a longitudinal, social network, and ideological perspective. The results clearly show that most candidates in 2009 still used Twitter reluctantly. Those who used Twitter did so predominantly for electoral campaigning and only sparingly for continuous campaigning. Candidates from

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progressive parties are the most active users of Twitter as a campaigning tool, whereas conservatives are virtually absent online. Although candidates' first degree networks are still relatively small and unconnected, their second degree networks are quite extensive. Candidates from parties in opposition have more extensive first degree networks than those from ruling parties. Candidates from fringe parties show small online networks.

Keywords

elections, political campaigning, social networking, Web 2.0

Paper submitted 6 September 2010; accepted for publication 21 January 2011

Introduction

Over the past two decades the growing adoption of the Internet by political actors, and its influence on election campaigning, has been the subject of numerous studies (e.g. Kampitaki et al., 2008). Although there is still a lively debate about whether e-campaigning replicates the patterns of offline campaigning or contributes to a fundamental change in the democratic discourse, there is little doubt that the Internet is increasingly important as a tool for political parties and candidates to provide information and stimulate political engagement. In general it seems that political parties and politicians see the benefits of the communicative potential offered by the Internet, but it has yet to be seen whether all the new possibilities offered by the Internet (such as exchange of information and opinions in discussion formats such as weblogs and social networking sites [SNSs]) will result in changing trends in political involvement.

The majority of research into e-campaigning has been conducted on political campaigns in the United States (US), where citizens and politicians adopted the Internet early on. Prior research shows that political parties and candidates have increased their web presence considerably (Gulati and Williams, 2007). Specific content and functionality on political party websites have become standard features. For instance, nearly all websites include information about the producer of the website and they all collect information from visitors so that those visitors can contribute in some way to the campaign. Kluver et al. (2007) confirm these findings in the international context: despite the different political systems in countries from different continents, political election websites seem to be dominated by the concept of informing features. Two-way communication and interactive features intended for stimulating citizens' activities in terms of 'political engagement' or 'mobilization' are far less common.

Although e-campaigning has been used for more than a decade, results show that, until a few years ago, most online campaigns were so-called Web 1.0 campaigns (cf. Kluver et al., 2007; Schweitzer, 2008). The concept of Web 1.0 indicates that the campaign is predominantly hierarchical and one-sided, sent from the politician and party to citizens using standard technology (predominantly html) and providing static content that is often duplicated from offline media sources and archived onto the website. The conclusion that information is mostly transmitted to website viewers (Gulati and Williams, 2007) is a disappointing result for those who expect that characteristics of the

Internet, such as interactivity (cf. Lilleker and Malagón, 2010), would help to reduce the gap between politicians and citizens

Frequently, new web applications (apps) – in particular the so-called Web 2.0 apps – are considered to increase political participation. Keywords commonly used in many Web 2.0 definitions (cf. Cormode and Krishnamurthy, 2008; O'Reilly, 2005) describe the technology as using the bottom-up approach, focused on sharing content online, collaboration among people online, and enabling socializing online, hence social media. Generic Web 2.0 applications are weblogs, social network services (SNSs such as Twitter, MySpace [www.myspace.com] and Facebook [www.facebook.com]), and sharing sites (e.g. Flickr [www.flickr.com], Picasa [www.picasaweb.google.com], YouTube [www.youtube.com]). Increasingly, Web 2.0 services combine multiple features, making it a one-stop platform for the dissemination of multi-media content, socializing, and blogging. For example, Facebook allows its users to give status updates, share photos, build social networks, and even play games. This is a major advancement as compared to Web 1.0 technology which consisted predominantly of static websites, complicated – and therefore user unfriendly – to maintain, leading to only a limited number of people with more than basic skills being able to produce content online.

One of the most popular Internet applications in the political arena of recent years is Twitter, introduced in 2006 as a hybrid of a micro-blogging service and a social network site (cf. boyd and Ellison, 2007). Interfaces to access Twitter are available for use on the web and the mobile phone. Twitter allows for public or private messages (also called 'tweets', micro-blog entries or status updates) no longer than 140 characters that will be sent to the webpage each Twitter subscriber has. People can indicate whether they want to be alerted to messages sent by other people using Twitter, thereby becoming followers of others – in this case, candidates. In the Netherlands, Twitter ranks as thirteenth of general websites in the Netherlands and is rising in popularity compared to other SNSs such as YouTube (third), Hyves (fourth) and Facebook (sixth) that already have an established position in the Top 10 (Alexa: The Web Information Company, 2010). On a global scale, a small proportion (1.7 percent) of the users originates from the Netherlands, most users coming from the US (34.5 percent; Alexa, 2010). However, Dutch Twitter users are considered to be quite active users, regularly reaching No.1 in the trending topic charts (e.g. political crisis February 2010 and World Cup soccer in South Africa June–July 2010). Because of these increased options of interactivity, Web 2.0 applications may have a greater impact on representation and participation because they encourage citizens to become politically involved (Jackson and Lilleker, 2009) or, stated by Gibson et al. (2005: 578): 'the online world is offering a space for political engagement among those who might not have been otherwise active'.

This study will start with a sketch of the development of political campaigning throughout the years, subsequently detailing the role of Twitter in the Dutch European Parliament campaign of 2009. Then we outline the aspects of Twitter on which we focus. We use a case study approach, conducting descriptive analyses on a large number of Twitter characteristics to explore from different angles how candidates use Twitter. The questions we will answer focus on: (1a) the level of Twitter adoption by candidates for European Parliament in the Netherlands; (1b) determining to what extent this is related to ideology; (2) to what extent candidates use Twitter as a means for continuous

campaigning instead of electoral campaigning; and (3) to what extent candidates from different parties are able to create substantive online social networks using Twitter.

Political election campaigns and the Internet

To contextualize the utilization of newest Web 2.0 applications in today's campaigns it is necessary to understand how political campaigning developed over time. Norris (2000) distinguishes three campaign models: the pre-modern or direct campaign, the modern, and the post-modern campaign. Amongst others, these different models reflect the distinct use of communications. In the pre-modern campaign, newspapers and direct face-to-face communication at rallies and meetings were dominant. Modern campaigning is characterized by the increased use of national television and advertizing. The post-modern campaign, introduced in the early 1990s, is characterized by the introduction of information and communication technology (ICT), especially the Internet (cf. Karlsen, 2009; Strömbäckm 2007). The pre-modern stage was characterized by strong ties between parties and their voters, and politicians using party-controlled media to communicate to their own voters. In the modern stage, ties between parties and voters were loosened and election campaigns were more concerned with vote-seeking across socially-diverse groups. Even so, parties mostly disseminated one universal message to voters using traditional mass media. They used television specifically to maximize and diversify their target audience. In the third stage, the Internet era, party identification and party attachment is declining even further (cf. Gibson and Römmele, 2001; Norris, 2000): an increasingly larger group of voters delays choosing a candidate or party until the last minute.

In politics, parties improve the use of professional marketing campaign strategies and increasingly approach voters as consumers searching for a product, and not as loyal partisans (Karlsen, 2009). Because the Internet can convey party messages to a diverse audience more directly, the Internet provides a major technological stimulus to the modernization and professionalization of election campaigns (Zittel, 2009), reconnecting politicians to their voters. However, this relation is fragile because voter loyalty to a party cannot be assumed to hold for longer periods. Therefore parties need constantly to reinforce the ties with these potential voters. To do so, it is important that people keep interested and motivated to remain involved. With the advent of Web 2.0 technology politicians are enabled to circumvent the traditional autonomous news media they had to rely upon exclusively in the pre-Internet era. However, these news media increasingly pursue their own interests that may conflict with those of the politicians (Norris, 2000: 159). Due to the enormous improvement of software usability (cf. Cormode and Krishnamuti, 2008), politicians themselves can now easily publish their opinions on personal websites, weblogs, micro-blogging sites and social networking sites without any third party assistance (e.g. party officials) or interference (e.g. journalists). By doing so regularly and interactively the politicians can connect and stay connected to people visiting these online platforms.

We argue that there might be a new campaigning model emerging alongside the three already identified by Norris (2000). Although Norris observed that the post-modern campaign style incorporated some interactive features of older pre-modern campaign style,

the newer, personally-kept web platforms, such as social network sites, have made this an essential feature, allowing for more personalization in politics (cf. Van Os et al., 2007b), whether this is candidate-centered campaigning or personality-centered campaigning. With social media such as Facebook and Twitter, candidate-centered campaigning of the pre-modern period (interactive and localized) seems to be intensified, but now online, whereas personality-centered campaigning goes beyond conveying political messages, sending out messages on what occupies politicians from a personal or even private perspective. These personal messages can deal with everything from enjoying your coffee, being stuck in a traffic jam or looking forward to starting reading a book by a favourite author. Through these personal messages people get some insight into the private life and interests of a politician. The assumption is that, by doing so, politicians create a stronger bond with people, going beyond the professional one, that will lead to closing the psychological distance between politician and citizen (cf. Caprara et al., 1999). This might even be reinforced by the ability of people to become a member of the online social circle enabling direct contact and engagement in not just political but also personal discussions with politicians. At the same time, because politicians generally are not overly trained in handling public relations (PR) or official communications, having these communications decentralized, unsupervised in the hands of politicians themselves can bring about some risks. One risk is that personalized, decentralized, and unsupervised communications and campaigning might lead to less party control over the politician. Party discipline – politicians conforming to the party standpoint – could subsequently become compromised.

Another feature of Web 2.0 platforms is that these are networked: politicians increasingly use social media such as Facebook and Twitter to create social networks and share content. Using these online networks could improve the fast dissemination of news for a number of reasons. First, the general network effect (cf. Hendler and Golbeck, 2008) predicts that networks tend to grow in a more or less exponential manner, enabling information to disseminate quickly in a well-connected population. This is enhanced by the increasingly popular re-tweets on Twitter, where original messages are forwarded to others or republished, or the share functionality on SNSs. Furthermore, even though politicians use social media to disseminate their messages, they still benefit from traditional media as well: because social media in general have become very popular, journalists from traditional media also monitor politicians' social media activities. If the politician's online activities are interesting enough to the newspapers, television, or radio, journalists might decide to redistribute (micro-) blogs using their respective platforms (e.g. newspaper website), paraphrase them or use them as a general source.

Table 1 summarizes the old and new campaign models. The first three models, as distinguished by Norris (2000) and Gibson and Römmele (2001), are valid for the pre-Web 2.0 eras. The fourth model refers to the Web 2.0 era. Further, it is important to note that these models are not discrete and exclusive, meaning that these styles are used to a greater or lesser extent by parties and politicians, and can be used by parties in a supplementary fashion (cf. Norris, 2000).

As is with many media innovations, opinions about the value of the Internet for political involvement are divided into two opposing positions. Many saw the advent of the Internet as a positive development allowing for more engagement of citizens in the

Table 1. Different type of political campaigns.

| | Premodern campaigns | Modern campaigns | Professional campaigns | Personal campaigns |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Tools | Print media, rallies, meetings, foot soldiers | Broadcast television news, news advertisements, polls | Internet, direct mail | Weblogs, micro-blogs, social network sites |
| Mode / style | Labour-intensive, interpersonal, amateur | Capital-intensive, mediated, indirect | Capital-intensive, marketed, targeted, continuous | Low-cost, computer-mediated, networked, personalized, amateur |
| Orientation to voter | Mobilizing voters = loyal partisans | Converting and mobilizing voters = loyal partisans and floating | Interactive, voters = consumers | Hyper interactive, voters = interested, personal |
| Internal power Local-/national-centric, individual and | distribution networked | Local-centric | National-centric | Local-/national centric, bifurcation |

Note: based on Norris (2000) and Gibson and Römmele (2001); last column added by the authors.

political process, creating more access to political information, and increasing opportunities for citizens' participation. The Internet also offers less established, new and fringe political parties more opportunities to disseminate their ideas and thereby enhance political competitiveness (Lilleker et al., 2010). This scenario, indicating that e-campaigning substitutes the traditional patterns of offline campaigning, is referred to as the innovation thesis (cf. Schweitzer, 2008). The assumption is that the specific features of the Internet, such as interactivity, hyper-textuality and multimedia lead to fundamental changes in the relationship between politics and the public.

Others, having a more pessimistic view, stress that the Internet merely reinforces and strengthens the present dominant political forces in society (Foot and Schneider, 2006). In essence, political parties use the Internet to replicate the patterns that already exist in the offline realm. Information is made accessible through one-way communication from the party to the potential voter. The media specific characteristics of the new ICTs, such as interactivity, are mostly left unexploited. This scenario, in which the Internet is nothing more than an extended tool to distribute the same information used in offline campaigning, is referred to as the normalization thesis (cf. Gibson et al., 2005; Schweitzer, 2008; Small, 2008). Although there seems to be quite an amount of empirical support for the normalization thesis (Gibson 2004; Schweitzer, 2005, 2008), most studies were conducted before the increased use of interactive Web 2.0 applications such as weblogs and social networking sites. Gibson and Ward (2009: 92) therefore note that these developments of so-called Web 2.0 technologies led some commentators 'to revive earlier ideas

about the supposed decentralizing nature of the Internet'. Despite the fact that it has been argued that using SNSs facilitates the creation of new virtual spaces to activate and mobilize people in the political arena, this has not yet been subject of extensive empirical study (Gibson and Ward, 2009). Social network services in particular provided candidates with a personal platform where people interested in the candidate can link up, become a member of the candidate's online social circle and, by doing so, interact with the candidate more closely. Although interaction was distinguished on traditional Web 1.0 candidate websites (Lilleker and Malagón, 2010), it merely facilitated interactivity in a passive way. SNSs, on the other hand, engage people more because they notify people in the online social network of new messages in real time and pro-actively by candidates themselves. Discussions even develop between politicians and candidates on one side and citizens on the other side. In this study we focus on how candidates used Twitter as a micro-blogging and social networking service in the campaign for the European Parliament elections of 2009 in the Netherlands.

European Parliament elections and the use of Twitter

In many western countries politics increasingly suffers from declining interest and participation of citizens in the political arena. Although this trend is visible at the national level, it is especially true of the interest of the public as well as media attention for the European Union (EU). Compared to other EU countries, Dutch newspapers and television newscasts devoted little attention to the European Parliamentary elections in 1999 and 2004 (de Vreese et al., 2006). Citizens in EU member states are only slightly interested in European politics, as shown by the poor turnout of 43 percent at the last elections for the European Parliament in 2009, the lowest turnout in history (European Parliament, 2009). In the Netherlands the turnout of voters was even lower (37 percent) although the Dutch people in general subscribe most strongly to the importance of the EU. Even so, the EU is said to suffer from a democratic deficit (cf. Van Os et al., 2007a). Decreasing voter turnout (for those countries without compulsory voting) seems a general trend (European Parliament, 2009; Flickinger and Studlar, 2007). More generally, political involvement of the general population is said to be dwindling across Europe. Explanations why voter turnout – which is one of the few defining moments in which people have a direct influence on politics – decreases are found at the individual level, such as socio-economic status, religiousness, political interest and efficacy and partisanship and institutional trust (Esser and De Vreese, 2007; Hadjar and Beck, 2010), but also at the national level (percent of agricultural workers' cf. Flickinger and Studlar, 2007).

From the perspective of political campaigning, many have high expectations of Web 2.0 as a means to close the gap between politics, politicians, and citizens. Using interactive applications, individual candidates can take a more visible and spontaneous role during the campaign. Politicians' interactivity with citizens also reduces the party-oriented influence that refers to the political establishment, and could encourage citizens to become more politically involved. SNSs reach an even larger and more diverse network of users than websites: in contrast to websites, to visit a candidate online is not necessary to direct one's browser to the political party site. The candidate's profile is integrated into the same SNS platform on which citizens themselves already frequently pass their

time socializing with others (Utz, 2009). Consequently, politically less interested individuals, navigating their own personal online social network, might easily stumble across political candidates in the social networks of their peers.

In Dutch politics, the use of SNSs such as Twitter by politicians has made a rapid entrance in the political domain. One of the most avid users of Twitter is the former minister of foreign affairs (Maxime Verhagen) who has over 34,220 followers, and on average sends 10 tweets a day (retrieved 4 January 2010).

Research questions

Research on the use of the Internet in politics can be studied from different angles, not only theoretically (Foot and Schneider, 2004; Gibson and Römmele, 2009; Schweitzer, 2008) but also methodologically (Vergeer and Hermans, 2008). This study will look at how Twitter is being used by European Parliament candidates from diverse viewpoints. Using a mixed methods approach (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007) this study will focus predominantly on: (1) the adoption of micro-blogging in political campaigns; (2) continuous campaigning; and (3) candidates' social network characteristics and their micro-blogging activities during the political campaign.

Adoption of new media technology. For the adoption of new technologies structural factors such as political and social characteristics of a country can have significant impact on the use of new technologies (Chen, 2010). In the Dutch case, the political system is characterized by a large degree of pluralism, always resulting in a coalition of two or more parties governing the country. In the 2009 EP elections 288 candidates from 17 political parties participated, eight of whom received enough votes to enter parliament.

How many candidates have adopted the relatively-new tool of Twitter is not clear, therefore we start with describing the use of Twitter. However, merely describing the degree of adoption does not provide answers as to why candidates from different parties utilize Twitter. Therefore this study also identifies a number of party characteristics that are to be expected when using Twitter as a campaigning tool. These characteristics will be discussed in the following section.

Regarding the adoption of micro-blogging as a new tool, we expect that the scant attention (De Vreese et al., 2006), and differences therein, can be increased and turned round by using Twitter. The web in general, and micro-blogging specifically, provides disadvantaged parties and candidates with opportunities to gain more attention from members of the public. Chen (2010), who compares political websites during elections in Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, shows that there are differences between the use of SNSs and political party characteristics. For instance, as minor parties receive limited media coverage and have limited financial resources, they were more likely to substitute formal candidate sites with free content hosting services. It appears that:

parties on the left, such as the Green Party, are often viewed as having a stronger, participatory grass roots organization culture said to be consistent with the interactive capacities of the Internet. On the other hand, parties with older consistencies may favour more established communication channels. (Chen, 2010: 8)

Therefore it can be expected that candidates from progressive parties (i.e. parties that strive for changing the role of the state and the size of the welfare state as opposed to conservatives; cf. Keman and Pennings, 2006) are likely to adopt new and advanced technology such as Twitter more readily than candidates from conservative parties.

Some electoral incentives seem likely to be at play as well concerning the adoption and use of Twitter as a new campaign tool. By utilizing new media such as social network sites, and Twitter in particular, new and fringe parties generally lacking substantial media attention might create more online attention and interest among people on the web and, as such, leveling the political playing field. Similarly, not only new political parties are in disadvantaged positions; also lower ranked candidates *within* parties might utilize new media to pursue personal voting. The Dutch electoral system, a party-centered system, uses open lists and preferential voting where votes are pooled at the party level. The use of the open list with only one vote to cast, a lower-ranked candidate has a declining chance to become elected, that is, unless she/he has enough preferential votes to outrank a higher ranked candidate. According to Carey and Shugart (1995), the electoral system used in the Netherlands will less likely pursue personal votes – as is demonstrated by the low number of candidates that have been elected to parliament based on preferential votes (Andeweg, 2004) – than in electoral systems where the method of single non-transferable vote is used. Twitter allows candidates to create more public attention and building, a personal reputation that might lead to more preferential votes, increasing the likelihood of being elected to parliament. However, because the Dutch electoral system is more conducive to corporation (Swindle, 2002) within the party instead of intraparty competition, it is less likely that Twitter will be used to that effect. Therefore, the most likely candidates to use Twitter are those that are ranked high by the party. Given these prior considerations the first research question is:

RQ1: To what extent did political candidates from political parties adopted micro-blogging in the European Parliamentary elections in 2009, and with what characteristics (e.g. ideology, candidate rank) is the use of Twitter associated?

Electoral or continuous campaigning: Twitter as a micro-blogging tool. In the pre-Internet era parties were dependent on the cooperation of the traditional media for attracting citizens' attention through airtime or space in the newspaper. Because airtime and space is limited, campaigning was confined to a small number of weeks prior to election day. Nowadays, the virtually limitless space on the Internet allows politicians to engage in a dialogue with the public and in full control over their online campaign: for example, when to start or finish the campaign, how active the campaign activities should be, on what topics the campaign should focus, and which population segments to target. With the advent of the Internet, permanent campaigning in particular to build public support becomes easier. Permanent campaigning (cf. Blumenthal, 1982), which is considered to be the dominant mode in the US, refers

to regularly polling the public on political issues as well as maintaining and building support, even in periods without elections.

At the same time, from a politician's view point, building public support while necessarily relying on a critical and independent press (cf. Hallin and Mancini, 2004) who might disrupt the direct flow of information from the politician to the citizens by asking critical and even unwelcome questions – as was the case in the pre-Internet era – is difficult. In the Internet era politicians can circumvent the press by increasingly utilizing online social media. These considerations raise the second research question on Twitter as a specific campaigning tool:

RQ2: To what extent do candidates perform continuous or electoral campaigning?

Twitter as political social networking. Twitter is not only a micro-blogging service, it also allows the creation of online social networks. People who subscribe to Twitter can indicate which other people on Twitter they wish to follow in the micro-blog contributions (called tweets). They are also notified when others are following their contributions to Twitter. Whether these networks are an indication of electoral popularity depends on whether new media technology supports the innovation or the normalization hypothesis. The innovation hypothesis states that new media might change existing power structures, suggesting that the distribution of popularity online (i.e. size of the networks) differs from the political parties' position in parliament. This suggests that candidates of opposition parties and fringe parties should have been able to create larger online networks than candidates from ruling parties. The third research question is as follows:

RQ3: To what extent are candidates from parties with differing positions in parliament able to create substantive online social networks using Twitter?

Data

The Twitter data was collected for the period of 1 February to 13 October 2009 using the public search and profile application programming interface (API). An API is a service provided by Twitter Inc (cf. <http://dev.twitter.com>) or other social media to access a part of the actual user database of a social network service, providing extremely reliable data, more reliable than manual coding of the user's Twitter page would have been. Normally, access to a database is granted to create so-called mash-up websites, websites that combine several databases to create a new service (e.g. a Google Map on a restaurant guide website identifying where three-star restaurants are located). However, the data are also accessible for scientific research.

Prior to accessing the Twitter database, various online sources (i.e. search engines, personal web pages, political party websites) were used to identify which candidates used Twitter. This resulted in 36 candidates using Twitter out of a total of 288 candidates

running for a seat in the European Parliament. Five candidates had deleted their initial account, and one replaced an account with a new one.

Measurements

The variables are grouped in micro-blogging activities and network characteristics. Micro-blogging activities consist of the following variables. The total number of tweets from 1 February to 13 October 2009, inclusive. The mean daily tweets is determined by dividing the total number of tweets by the total number of days prior to election day. The consistency of daily tweeting is determined by the standard deviation of daily tweets (the daily deviation around the mean daily number of tweets prior to election day). The daily tweet increase (number of tweets on day_t minus the number of tweets on day_{t-1} prior to election day) refers to whether tweeting is specifically performed for campaigning purposes or as a structural performance. The number of addressed tweets (i.e. @-tweets) indicates whether candidates are engaging in an online dialogue with their followers prior to election day.

The network characteristics being measured are the following: the types of relations are measured by the number of people following the candidate, the number of people followed by the candidate, and the number of reciprocal relations with the candidate (following and being followed by the candidate). The number of second degree followers is determined by the sum of the number of followers of all people that follow the candidate (thus not counting the first degree followers). This indicates how rapidly the candidate's network grows with each degree. The degree that the networks of the followers show overlap is indicated by the number of shared followers. This indicator is determined by the number of followers of the candidate who also follow other candidates.

Date was measured by the date a tweet was posted. The period of campaigning was divided into three periods: the pre-election period (1 February–3 June 2009), postelection period (4 June–13 October 2009) and election day itself (4 June 2009). The two dimensions of political ideology (i.e. social-centre-right, conservative-centre-progressive) were based on a classification developed by Van Kersbergen and Krouwel (2008; see also Appendix 1). The party's list number is a rank number based on the electoral success in the prior EP elections of 2004 (1 = most votes, 7 least votes, 8–17 = new parties). A standardized rank index – compensate for the length of the candidate list – was constructed to calculate the relative position of candidates on the party's candidate list (0 = lowest ranked candidate, 1 = highest ranked candidate).

Results

Adoption of Twitter

Table 2 shows that Twitter was adopted by a fraction of all candidates: 36 of 288 had subscribed to Twitter. However, there are some parties that show relatively higher usage, such as the social democratic party (PvdA), the green party (GroenLinks), the progressive party (D66) and the Pro-EU party (NewEuropeans). As such all candidates who used Twitter can be labeled as innovators or, at least, early adopters. Candidates from most successful parties in past elections were the most likely to adopt Twitter. New parties

Table 2. Candidates per political party (expressed in absolute numbers and as Twitter adopters).

| List number | Political party (abbr*) | Number of candidates | Number of twitterers | Mean rank of twitterers |
|-------------|--|----------------------|----------------------|-------------------------|
| 1 | Christian Democrats (CDA) | 25 | 3 | .92 |
| 2 | Social Democrats (PvdA) | 13 | 4 | .73 |
| 3 | Liberal party (VVD) | 30 | 5 | .77 |
| 4 | GroenLinks (GL) | 19 | 6 | .62 |
| 5 | Socialistische Partij (SP) | 30 | 1 | 1.00 |
| 6 | Christian Unie-SGP** (CU-SGP) | 20 | 1 | 1.00 |
| 7 | Democraten 66 (D66) | 30 | 6 | .91 |
| 8 | Newropeans (NR) | 8 | 4 | .54 |
| 9 | Europa Voordelig! & Duurzaam (EVD) | 5 | 0 | Na |
| 10 | Solidara (SOL) | 25 | 2 | .77 |
| 11 | Partij voor de Dieren (PvdD) | 15 | 1 | 1.00 |
| 12 | Europese Klokkenluiders Partij (EKP) | 10 | 0 | Na |
| 13 | De Groenen (GR) | 7 | 0 | Na |
| 14 | Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV) | 10 | 0 | Na |
| 15 | Liberaal Democratische Partij (LIBDEM) | 11 | 1 | 1.00 |
| 16 | Partij voor Europese Politiek (PEP) | 6 | 0 | Na |
| 17 | Libertas (LIB) | 24 | 2 | .96 |
| | Total | 288 | 36 | |

*Some abbreviations are official ones, some are non-official for presentation purposes.

**Being small parties, CU and SGP decided to join forces in the campaign. However, later they discontinued their collaboration. Because officially they ran jointly, the analyses will take this into account.

(list number ≥ 8) hardly used Twitter, indicating they were not able to level the playing field.

Regarding the question of whether the candidates that used Twitter used it for personal votes, the final column in Table 2 shows that mostly higher ranked candidates used Twitter. Apart from two parties (GroenLinks and Newropeans), all parties score above .75 indicating that those who used Twitter belonged to the top quarter of the candidate list. This suggests that Twitter is not used for intraparty competition by pursuing more personal votes to increase the odds of becoming elected.

Twitter as a campaigning tool: Micro-blogging activities

Figure 1 shows that there were large differences in the micro-blogging activities of parties, ranging from approximately 23 tweets a day for D66 to none for several other parties. Furthermore, it shows that smaller and younger political parties (i.e. Libertas, Newropeans, Solidara and Liberal Democrats) did not use Twitter to a greater extent: those parties that might benefit most from new media technology utilize it the least. One finding regarding the Socialist Party presented in Figure 1 is quite surprising. Although their general campaign is strongly based on utilizing viral campaigning on the Internet, micro-blogging by candidates is virtually absent. It seems that the Socialist Party (SP) wanted to retain control over the campaign

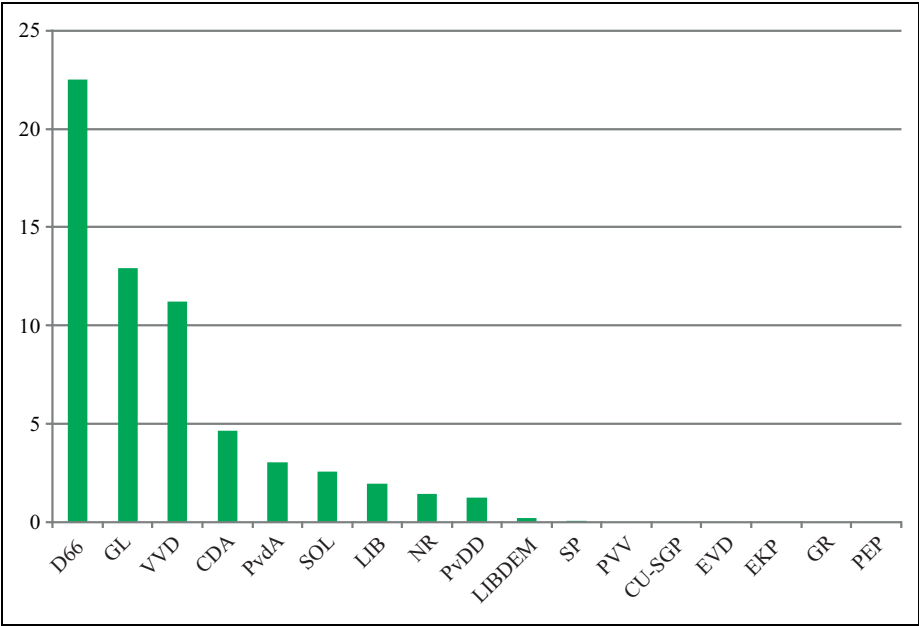


Figure 1. Mean number of daily tweets by party.

messages being sent to the public. This is also evident by the absence of personal URLs for this party: all communication about politicians and candidates was only to be found on the party website.

Table 3 shows that progressive party candidates were more active in micro-blogging than candidates in the centre and the conservative ones who did not micro-blog at all. This finding suggests that members of a progressive party are also more likely to adopt new media technology, a finding that was to be expected. As for the socialist, centre and right wing parties, the centre parties used Twitter more extensively than the right wing.

Table 3. Daily micro-blogging activity on Twitter by ideology.

| | Mean number of of daily tweets | |
|-----------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------|
| <u>Ideology</u> | <u>Mean</u> | <u>Std. Deviation</u> |
| Progressive | 35.39 | 21.41 |
| Center | 7.84 | 11.91 |
| Conservative | .00 | .00 |
| | | |
| Socialist | 16.06 | 13.21 |
| Center | 27.17 | 19.11 |
| Right wing | 11.22 | 13.32 |

N = 255 (number of days).

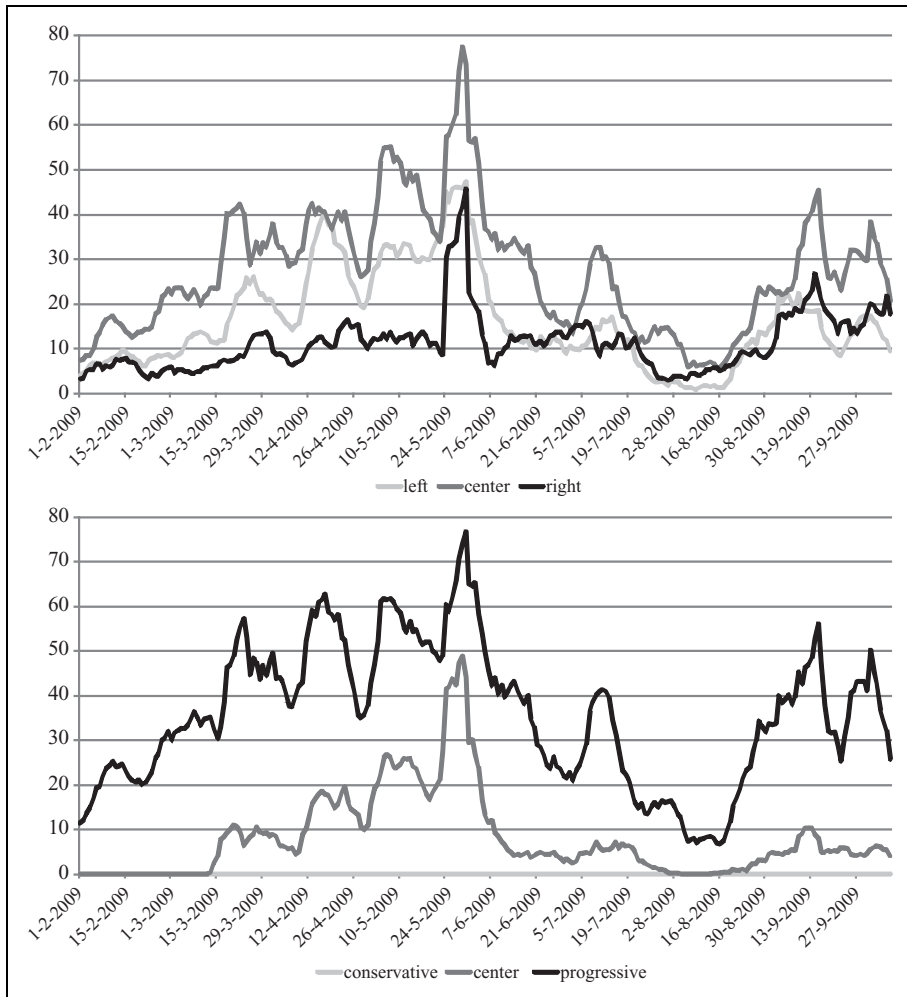


Figure 2. Degree of blogging activity during the campaign (7 day moving averages of daily tweets)
Note: Because the two political dimensions are independent from each other, the categories 'center' on both dimensions are not identical. A party belonging to the center on one dimension does not necessarily belong to the center on the other dimension. For this reason the two dimensions are graphed separately.

Looking at how the micro-blogging activities evolved prior to the elections and afterwards in more detail, Figure 2 shows that there was a steady general increase of daily tweets, culminating in a sharp peak on 30 May when a Twitter debate between candidates was organized by a national radio show. This event resulted in even more micro-blogs than on election day four days later (4 June 2009). After election day, the number of tweets rapidly decreased, partly due to summer recess. Then, at the end of August, the number of tweets slowly increased again because members of parliament were returning from vacation to start working again. Overall

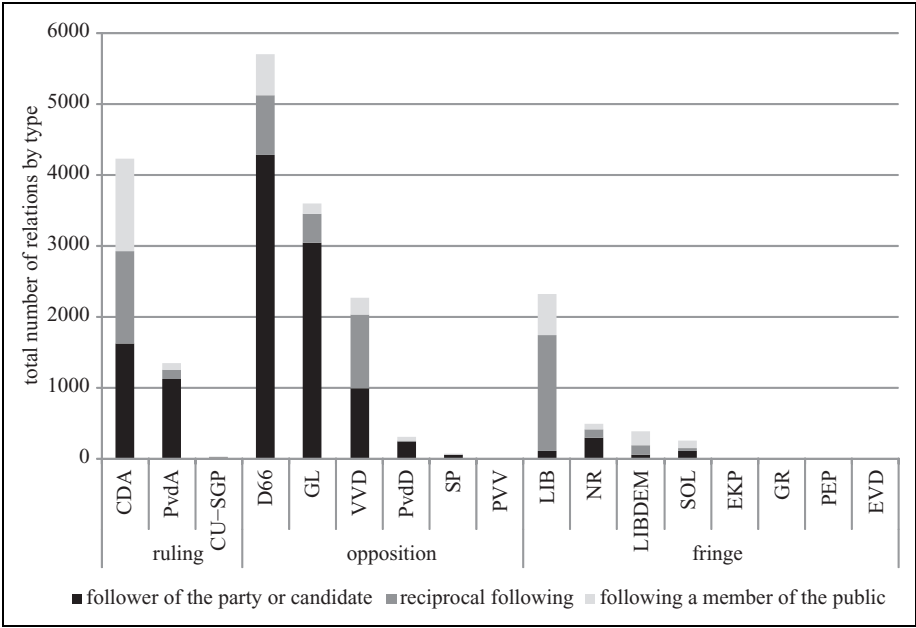


Figure 3. Online network sizes and political party.

this suggests that the use of Twitter for campaigning continuously was limited, but that it was predominantly used in electoral campaigning.

The level of blogging activity differs between different ideologies. Not surprisingly, the progressive candidates were consistently most active. Being progressive implies being open-minded about change and therefore more likely to adopt innovations, for instance a new campaigning tool such as Twitter. The left wing candidates were also more active than others. To some extent this can be explained by some left wing candidates belonging to a progressive party. The conservatives, on the other hand, do not micro-blog at all. Being conservative entails being resistant to novel developments, resulting in a slow adoption rate of innovations and, as such, identifying them as laggards in this field. What is surprising is that the right wing candidates apparently did not use their liberty to adopt and use micro-blogging, even though many of them had personal websites and personal URLs.

Although candidates from different ideologies showed differences in the level of micro-blogging activities, the patterns across time were quite similar: at several points in time, identical peaks occurred for candidates subscribing to different ideologies. This suggests that candidate behaviour *across time* is quite predictable, and that electoral relevant events trigger most candidates on Twitter to express themselves in similar ways, competing for the public's attention.

Twitter as an online social network service

To create a better understanding of candidates' online networks we made a graph of the three types of relations: follower, following and reciprocal. Figure 3 shows that some of

the opposition parties had a large following (D66: 4,285; GL: 3,056), whereas the Christian Democrats (CDA) followed the most other people (1,635) of all ruling parties. Generally, reciprocal relations were relatively absent in the ruling parties and fringe parties. Libertas (LIB) showed a strikingly different pattern: these candidates had an enormous amount of reciprocated relations (1,632) and relatively few that were with those who were exclusively followers (120).

Reviewing the second degree networks of candidates we see that the ruling party, CDA, clearly had the largest second degree network, followed by D66. The Christian-Democrats (CDA) were also the most effective (see Figure 4): on average each follower of a candidate (followers + reciprocal) brings 63,854 additional followers in the second degree. In second place comes CU-SGP, the conservative religious combination, with on average 51,408 second degree followers for each first degree follower. This, however, should not be overemphasized. First of all, the high numbers for CDA and CU-SGP are produced by only two candidates. Furthermore, the second degree network especially increases when official media decide to follow the candidate on Twitter. Traditional media on Twitter generally have a large first degree following themselves. If the media decide to follow the candidate, their first degree network becomes part of the second degree network of the candidate. Still, from a candidate's point of view, it is good to have official media in your following network, allowing easy dissemination of one's opinion not only to the general population, but also to inform the media pro-actively.

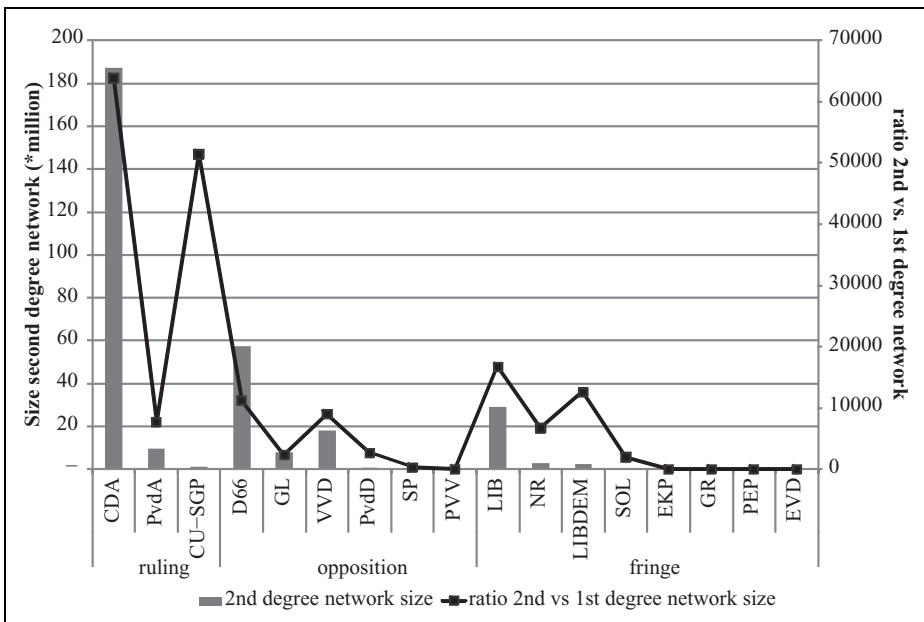


Figure 4. Size of second degree network size and ratio with first degree network size.

To what degree these network indicators correlate we need to look at Table 4. Regarding the first degree network we see that the more people a candidate is following, the more reciprocal relations he or she has ($r = .845$). However, the number of people that follow the candidate is unrelated to the number of reciprocated relations. This might be explained by the fact that having a very large following makes it virtually impossible for the candidate to respond to all requests to reciprocate. First of all, it is quite time consuming to accept manually these requests for relations by clicking to follow those in one's followers network. Furthermore, even if many relations were to be reciprocated it would result in the candidate receiving many tweets (status updates) of these people as well. Without organizing the online network (e.g. using a Twitter client¹ such as TweetDeck) it would mean a large and constant stream of messages from people virtually unknown to the candidate.

There are significant positive correlations between the first degree network characteristics and the second degree characteristics: the more the candidate is followed by others, or follows others or reciprocates, the larger the following of these people themselves and the more these people follow others in general (range $r = .435 - r = .764$; cf. the network effect, cf. Hendler and Golbeck, 2008). Similar to the first degree network of the candidates, it holds for the second degree network that the more people follow someone, the more likely it is this person is followed as well ($r = .792$). Surprisingly, the degree to which these networks overlap each other correlates negatively with the network characteristics: the larger the first and second degree networks, the less the networks show overlap with networks of other candidates. Especially when more relations are reciprocated, the chance of having the same persons in the network as other candidates becomes less likely. This suggests that, as these networks grow, the more they become disconnected; or to put it another way: when candidates start setting up their Twitter network and their networks are still small it is more likely that they start with the same persons. There could be two reasons. First, candidates might begin to add people they already know outside the Twitter realm (e.g. family, friends, colleagues, avid Twitter users) to their network. Second, Twitter provides newly-subscribed users with a number of suggestions to follow on Twitter. Since these suggestions are identical for all new users it automatically creates network overlap which will continue unless the new users delete these from their network.

Table 5 shows the relations between micro-blogging activities and the network characteristics. It indicates that, the larger the first degree networks are, the more a candidate posts tweets. This holds in general for blogging activities, regardless of whether it is prior to election day ($r > .525$), on election day ($r > .419$) or after election day ($r > .437$). Furthermore, the larger the first degree network, the larger the increase in activities in the election campaign ($r > .328$). The findings for the first degree network indicators are roughly replicated for the second degree network indicators. The question of causality, whether more tweets lead to a larger following, or whether a larger following leads to more tweets remains to be answered. As for the degree to which the networks overlap, these show negative relations with blogging activities: the more active candidates micro-blog, the less their networks overlap.

Conclusion

In this paper we explored how candidates used Twitter for micro-blogging and for social networking to inform, communicate and connect with members of the public during the

Table 5. Associations between net characteristics and blog behaviour.

| | Total number of tweets pre election day | Total number of tweets election day | Total number of tweets post election day | Mean daily tweets | SD daily tweets | Daily tweet increase |
|-----------------------------------|--|--|---|----------------------|--------------------|-------------------------|
| First degree | .598*** | .419** | .437** | .650*** | .567*** | .328* |
| follower of candidate | | | | | | |
| following member of the public | .526*** | .599*** | .455** | .572*** | .225 | .571*** |
| Shared relations | .525*** | .524*** | .524*** | .545*** | .095 | .451** |
| average number | -.505*** | -.513*** | -.421** | -.500*** | -.214 | -.465*** |
| maximum number | -.375** | -.402** | -.280 | -.355** | -.060 | -.371** |
| Second degree | .568*** | .583*** | .448** | .606*** | .315* | .531*** |
| followers net size | | | | | | |
| following net size | .483*** | .494*** | .452** | .512*** | .353* | .415** |

N = 31; ***p < .010; **p < .050; *p < .100.

European Parliamentary elections of 2009. We used three perspectives to highlight their activities in what we call a personal campaigning and the search for personal votes. The research questions focused on the degree micro-blogging was adopted, how active candidates were, how candidates connected to members of the public and whether these are indications of a new campaign style dubbed 'personal campaigning'.

In terms of adoption (RQ1), given that only a fraction (36 out of 288) had a Twitter account during the European Parliamentary elections, it is justified to say that candidates were in the early stages of adopting micro-blogging and online social networking (i.e. Twitter) as a campaign tool. The findings clearly indicate that the progressive candidates (i.e. those that promote change in society) were more likely to adopt new media technology than the conservative ones. As such, the campaign strategy being chosen is, in part, reflecting the ideology to which a candidate subscribes. Furthermore, regarding the question whether candidates use Twitter to pursue personal votes, the findings show that mostly higher-ranked candidates, who are already the most likely ones to be elected, use Twitter. This is not surprising due to the fact that the Dutch electoral system is more conducive to intra-party corporation as compared to intra-party competition. Still, the adoption of Twitter – a campaign tool specifically intended for personal use – has not changed this. Whether this will happen in the long run needs to be determined by follow-up research.

Regarding RQ2, although Web 2.0 technology allows politicians to circumvent traditional media and continuously campaign throughout the year, the results show that campaigning is predominantly centered around election day and decreasing rapidly after the elections. As such, support building using Twitter is strongly election related. To some degree the steep decline is due to summer recess, which started slowing down political activities in general. This is illustrated by the increase of Twitter activity at the end of August, indicating that political life has started again. This trend is similar for all candidates, irrespective of ideology. Still, most avid micro-bloggers are candidates from progressive parties. The results further indicate that fringe parties, those that lack traditional media attention, do not benefit fully from the new social media, illustrated by the low adoption rate and low activity among them. As such, there does not seem to be an equalizing effect by the use of Twitter, empowering less advantaged parties. This is surprising because Web 2.0 media are often easy to use and freely available, reducing adoption barriers and providing political actors who have few resources with more opportunities to increase their share of citizens' attention. Candidates from opposition parties in parliament use social micro-blogging more extensively than those from the ruling parties. Being in opposition implies that campaigning is more necessary than for those in power. Those in power want to retain the status quo and most likely reason that changing a successful strategy (i.e. modern campaigning) is not necessary. However, the online networks of one ruling party were large as compared to those of other parties.

Regarding the Twitter networks (RQ3), all candidates are followed by members of the public and also follow members of the public themselves. However, it appears that the more people follow the candidate the less likely this will be reciprocated. This suggests that, when candidates become more popular on social media, these social media become less social. A plausible reason is that, at a certain point, it becomes virtually impossible to reciprocate relations on the net simply due to popularity. This implies that the social medium devolves into a traditional uni-directional medium, not so much in its technical

architecture but in its actual use. This indicates that candidates' networks are predominantly for informing citizens, and not for being informed by citizens, or to communicate. A further indication that the use of social media is not yet fully utilized is the low number of shared members between candidates. This implies that the candidates' networks are largely disconnected and maybe even homophilous (McPherson et al., 2001): apparently, the vast majority of people only follow one candidate, and this suggests that the reach of the candidate's messages is confined to a relatively small and homogeneous network. As such these networks might have limited capabilities to persuade new people to vote for the candidate. This could be compensated by the second degree network, which is also very important for the dissemination of information.

Although these second degree networks probably consist of so-called weak ties, these ties are considered very effective in disseminating information across loosely-connected and heterogeneous networks (cf. Granovetter, 1973). This latter defuses an often-heard argument that using Twitter or online social networks in general is of little use in political campaigning because micro-blogging will not generate sufficient impact on the voting outcome due to a first degree network that is far smaller than the number of votes needed to obtain a seat in parliament. For example, a Dutch candidate would need at least 182,155 votes to be elected to the European Parliament, whereas the maximum number of followers of candidates in this sample is 2,911. Of course this argument assumes that Twitter campaigning replaces other forms of campaigning tools completely. This does not seem to be the case: all parties and candidates use a multitude of communication tools (traditional media, websites, SNSs and rallies) to reach potential voters. Even if micro-blogging was the sole communication tool in use, reviewing the second degree network sizes suggests that indirect – second degree – relations are exponentially larger (the largest being over 180 million in size). A re-tweet of a candidate's posting by someone in the first degree network to the second degree network, then, would vastly increase the online network's potential. Lastly, it is important to note that attracting votes is also very much dependent on the parties' positions on a wide range of issues and on political parties' place in political history (cf. Gibson and Römmele, 2001).

Given these findings, it is worthwhile assessing whether the use of social networking sites constitutes a new campaign style dubbed 'personal campaigning' or that it is merely a variation of post-modern campaign style. Following the classification presented in Table 1, the tool (i.e. Twitter) was still being used only by a minority of candidates in 2009. Those who use Twitter adopt a low-cost tool that supplements other existing campaign tools. The costs involved are the allocation of time to use Twitter and maybe a mobile device (e.g. smart phone or net book). The candidates who use Twitter have small first degree networks, but their second degree networks expand exponentially, allowing for quick dissemination of communications.

These online networks allow regular people to become a member of the inner social circle of the political candidate. As such citizens' proximity to candidates decreases, leading to closeness – although virtual – and might lead to more engagement on the part of the citizen. Still, although regular people can get closer to candidates, this is most likely not acknowledged by the candidate because these relations are often not reciprocated. Although we cannot make claims about personalized content, given the moderate to strong correlations between the size of the online social network of candidates and the

message activities suggests that there is at least some interactivity between candidate and citizens. It may even be interpreted as hyper-interactivity because the number of messages sent out increased dramatically as Election Day came closer (cf. Loomis, 2000).

Our conclusion based on analyzing Twitter in its early adoption phase during the European Parliamentary election of 2009 is that personal campaigning is still in its infancy but shows campaigning potential. Schmitt-Beck and Mackenrodt (2010) indicated that offline social networks are more influential than media in mobilizing people to vote. The subsequent question is to what degree these online social networks are effective in doing so. Because the Internet is particularly popular among younger people who, in general, are less involved in politics, this style of campaigning might increasingly entice youngsters into the political realm. Utz (2009) shows in an experiment that politicians using SNSs and being responsive are perceived more likeable, although the same study also shows that people subscribing to politicians' SNSs already favour this politician over others.

This type of study should also be conducted to test its actual effectiveness on data from other elections, especially focusing on how Twitter might improve public perception of parties and candidates and, as a consequence, could mobilize people to vote for that particular candidate. Still, these analyses are on the European Parliamentary elections in the Netherlands and might not be 'representative' for other EP elections in 2009 across Europe. On one hand, if these findings are representative, they are an indication of things to come in other election campaigns across Europe, since the Netherlands is an early adopter of Twitter. If this case is not representative, and there are reasons to think so (e.g. different electoral and party systems, varying degrees of Internet adoption), it provides opportunities for cross-national comparative research on the use of social media as campaign tools in elections.

Notes

1. A Twitter client is software for the computer or the mobile Phone to use Twitter without the Twitter web page. The most popular non-web clients are TweetDeck, Twitter for iPhone and Foursquare (Available at www.twitstat.com/twitterclientusers.html).

Acknowledgements

This research was supported by WCU (World Class University) programme through the National Research Foundation of Korea funded by the Ministry of Education and Technology (No. 515-82-06574).

Appendix I

Political parties across political ideologies

| | Left | Centre | Right |
|--------------|------------|--------|------------|
| Conservative | | CU/SGP | Newropeans |
| Center | PvdA, SP | CDA | VVD |
| Progressive | GroenLinks | D66 | |

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