

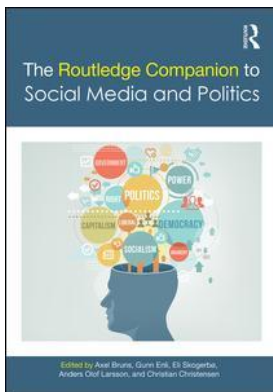
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Part III

POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS

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22

FROM EMERGING TO ESTABLISHED?

A Comparison of Twitter Use during Swedish Election Campaigns in 2010 and 2014

Anders Olof Larsson and Hallvard Moe

Introduction

Much as with the Internet during the 1990s, it is often suggested that social media services such as Twitter provide novel arenas for communication about political issues, in addition to contact between citizens and politicians (e.g. Chadwick, 2008). Indeed, a great deal of scholarship has examined the supposed parliamentary-political potentials of Twitter, and most research has been fashioned as single country or election case studies. While these foci can certainly provide the level of in-depth results necessary to grasp the initial tendencies of the adoption new media platforms, the need for comparative work across political elections is apparent (e.g. Bruns and Stieglitz, 2012).

This chapter presents a study gauging developments in political Twitter use during two Swedish parliamentary elections—2010 and 2014. Results from the Swedish context allow us to study these developments in what could be labelled a democratically advanced setting, given high levels of Internet use and voter attendance. Arguably, such an empirical setting could be interesting with regards to seeing early changes in user patterns (Rogers, 2003). Specifically, our interest lies in studying processes of the ‘not-so-new’ phenomenon of social media in an electoral context, that is to study to what extent the use of Twitter moves from being a novelty to become a staple of political communication.

Our analysis is based on tweets including the most prolific hashtags for each of the two (2010 and 2014) elections. The featured approach builds on the study of several recent election campaigns in Scandinavia (see Larsson and Moe, 2012, 2013; Moe and Larsson, 2012). Our basic assumption is that during the period of study, Twitter went from creating ‘buzz’ as a novel channel in 2010 to becoming something of a staple of

political campaigning by 2014, with more established patterns of use—more mature, more everyday, perhaps even mundane—amongst politicians, campaigners, activists and for politically-inclined citizens.

We call this assumed evolution a move from *emerging* to *established*. To define what we mean by these terms, we introduce a conceptual analytical frame that compares five criteria which point to different aspects of political Twitter use. In addition to improving our understanding of the changing patterns of Twitter use for political communication, the chapter suggests a framework for diachronic comparisons of uses of specific media services or online communication platforms.

A Framework for Studying Developments in Twitter Use

Various online platforms and services rise and fall rapidly. As a result, the Internet has interested researchers for more than two decades—a fascination that has resulted in a plethora of different approaches to the study of online political communication. More generally, understanding and modelling the developments of a medium is a key exercise in media and communication studies. Indeed, Rogers's (2003) classic study of the diffusion of innovations has triggered a wide variety of analyses of the spreading of different media (e.g. Nam and Barnett, 2010) similar to the one undertaken here.

Within media history, we can distinguish between three different analytical scales corresponding to macro-, meso- and micro-historical perspectives (following Drotner 2011, 119). The first, represented by such diverse contributions as McLuhan (e.g. 1965) or Habermas's (1962 [1990]) early work on the public sphere, is interested in the overall relations between the media and society over long stretches of time. Staying at the institutional or sender-side, a meso-historical approach typically zooms in on one medium during a particular period of change, an example being Eisenstein's 1979 book on the printing press (Drotner 2011, 125). With a micro-perspective, studies have tended to zoom in further on one media institution, one program format, or the use practices of one particular group over a short time span.

While the approach developed for the present study does not make claims at media history, Drotner's categorisation is helpful to situate our interest. We focus on how one particular media service—Twitter—as represented by those who use it for political communication, changes over a relatively short period of time. As such, our approach rests somewhere between the analytical scale of a meso- and a micro-historical approach as we seek to test our assumption that the use of Twitter in Swedish politics changed from emerging to established between the election campaigns in 2010 and 2014.

To operationalise the assumed change, we identify five criteria: (1) volume of tweets and users, (2) degree of dependence on mainstream media, (3) relations between most and least active users, (4) use of Twitter's dialogic modes of address (@replies) and redistribution (retweets) among the most prolific users, in addition to (5) the ability for non-elite users to make an impact. In what follows, we describe these criteria and how they help us test and define the assumed move from emerging to established.

Volume of Tweets and Users

While Twitter is currently among the more well-known social media services available, adoption rates are not as high as one might expect. Indeed, figures indicate that in 2010 between 1 and 8 per cent of Swedish Internet users were making some sort of

use of Twitter (Larsson and Moe, 2012). More recent studies suggest that about 2 per cent of the Swedish population maintain some form of activity on Twitter, with type and frequency of activity varying considerably (Brynolf, 2013). Thus, while 90 per cent of Swedes have access to the Internet at home (Carlsson and Facht, 2014), Twitter use must be regarded as somewhat low.

As such, while a general increase of user base as well as usage might be expected, we should be careful not to overestimate the spread of Twitter use. For example, a study on Twitter use during two Norwegian elections—the 2011 regional and 2013 national elections—found the number of tweets with election hashtags to have doubled in the month-long period leading up to the latter of these two compared to the first (Larsson and Moe, 2014). While these elections differed in terms of size and scope, and are not directly comparable with our current cases, the Norwegian context can serve as an example of these developments.

In an operationalised sense, then, a first, basic criteria of a move from emerging to established would be changes in the numbers of users and tweets for the particular case under study, from one election to the next. An increase in each of these numbers would indicate a development towards established uses.

Dependence on Mainstream Media

Research has suggested that much political Internet use in general (Lilleker and Jackson, 2010), as well as social media use, tends to follow events covered in the mainstream media—especially towards the end of election periods (e.g. Larsson and Moe, 2013). Such findings are complemented by a more specific claim made by Jungherr (2014) who, in his study of the 2009 German federal elections found that Twitter usage levels increased especially during “media events that allowed for the public discussion and negotiation” (Jungherr, 2014, 247), such as televised political debates. While it is difficult to precisely detail what would indicate an independent ‘Twitter agenda’ as opposed to an agenda dictated by established media outlets, we nevertheless seek to make inroads by tracing upsurges in Twitter use in relation to election-related media events. The second criteria, then, is dependence on, or reactive use in relation to, mainstream media. While the research discussed above suggests that more often than not, mainstream media outlets appear to have clear influences on hashtagged Twitter activity, we might also find reverse or mixed tendencies in our data (e.g. Wallsten, 2007).

Relations between Active and Less Active Users

Given certain technical and editorial obstacles, partaking in mediated political discussions has traditionally been subject to judgments made by gatekeepers. The Internet supposedly makes it easier for groups hitherto unengaged in political debates to take part to higher extents. The result should be participation from a greater number of people, and a more even distribution between active users and the rest.

Inspired by Nielsen (2006), we test this empirically by comparing the distributions of tweets sent by all users for both elections and divide them into three groups based on frequency of activity (lead users, highly active and least active users). This does not allow us to track whether or not specific citizens change from disengagement to engagement over time. Still, on a general level, if we look at these relations over time,

we should expect a trend towards more evenly distributed patterns as Twitter goes from being the arena of a relatively few techno-savvy early adopters to becoming more widely used among a more diverse group.

As such, this third criterion considers user patterns between very active and less active users. A tendency towards more evenly distributed patterns would signal a move towards established use.

Use of Redistributive Modes of Communication

The fourth criterion considers the uses of retweets (the redistribution of a tweet sent by some other user). Focusing on the very top users, we obtain information from their public profile pages on Twitter to see what types of users appear to enjoy higher levels of popularity in this regard—and what types of users are more frequent in redistributing. While we assume that, given their role in public life, politicians, journalists, and other societal elites might enjoy such leverage to larger degrees than average citizens, we might also see some developments regarding these uses from one election to another (see Larsson and Moe, 2014).

While such a focus on high-end users undoubtedly limits our general explanatory possibilities, top users have been shown to stand for a considerable portion of activity within Twitter (Bastos et al., 2013) and could therefore be seen as especially interesting, “particularly during periods of election campaigns” (Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan, 2012, 2). As previous scholarship has largely shown that societal elites tend to be well-represented amongst high-end users, primarily as being on the receiving end of re tweets, we suspect that such actors—including politicians, journalists and celebrities—will be highly represented.

As for those users who are primarily active as senders of retweets, we suggest that they—conversely to what was discussed above—mostly can be described as ‘non-elites’. As comparably low-level politicians (and those supporting them) have been found to be especially active on social media (Larsson and Kalsnes, 2014), we choose to define ‘non-elites’ rather broadly—in order to also include those political actors who might be somewhat well-known, but who did not, at the time of each election, enjoy incumbency status or hold seats in parliament. As such, we expect that the top senders of retweets will primarily self-identify as what we here understand as ‘non-elites’ (e.g. anonymous users, citizens, lower-level politicians).

The fourth criterion covers uses of specific modes of communication on Twitter. In line with a rich-get-richer-effect and the normalisation thesis (e.g. Klinger 2013), we assume that elites that dominate offline over time will adopt the modes of communication to dominate the arena of Twitter as well. This would signal a move towards established user patterns.

Ability for Non-Elite Users to Make an Impact

The potential for any user to make an impact also tells us something about the robustness of the Twittersphere. The bigger and deeper the sphere becomes, with more users, more offline celebrities, and more established modes of communication in accordance with the former four criteria, the harder we would expect it to be for a new user, followed by few and sparsely networked, to make an impact in the sense of having their message redistributed via retweets and/or discussed via @replies.

The final criterion, then, has less to do with quantitatively measuring developments than examining significant individual cases of Twitter use where scarcely networked non-elite users managed to gain attention (via retweets) to stand out in the Twitter-sphere during the election campaign periods. Fewer examples would signal a move towards a more streamlined and established Twitter use.

Data and Method

For both rounds of data collection, we employed what is often referred to as a hashtag-based approach (see Larsson and Moe, 2014), using the YourTwrapperKeeper tool to archive the main thematic hashtags for each election. YourTwrapperKeeper employs the Twitter stream and search APIs to collect public tweets and corresponding metadata. Data collection was performed in similar ways for both periods, starting one month before each respective election day and terminating three days after that same day on both occasions (for 2010: August 19—September 22, Election day on September 19; for 2014: August 14—September 17, Election day on September 14).

Data analysis was performed using statistical techniques available in Excel and SPSS. Furthermore, Gawk scripts were utilised to control data quality, filter the data sets, and extract information from them (e.g. Bruns, 2011). With regards to the identities of high-end Twitter users, their profile pages were visited and the self-disclosed information provided there was taken into account.

Results and Discussion

Volume of Tweets and Users

First, with regards to our initial assumption regarding increases of tweets sent as well as users involved, Table 22.1 provides descriptive statistics.

While the data presented in Table 22.1 might not be rich in detail, the results must nevertheless be called clear. From 2010 to 2014, the volume of tweets more than doubled, while the increase in users involved proved even larger. More than five times as many individual users chose to tweet with the selected hashtag in 2014 compared to 2010. Thus, this must be described as a definite growth in popularity, perhaps as a result of the general spread of the service among the populace and/or of increased use of hashtags in mainstream media outlets (see, e.g. Halavais, 2014).

While use has indeed increased, some users are more persistent in their tweeting than others. Table 22.2 provides an overview of the most active users of Twitter, in terms of sending undirected Twitter messages during both periods under study.

Table 22.2 seems to suggest a dominance of journalists and media organisations for both years, with individual journalist making a clearer mark on the 2010 distributions. Such a shift from accounts operated by individuals to those operated by organisations

Table 22.1 Volumes of Tweets Sent and Users Involved for #val2010 and #val2014

	#val2010	#val2014	Change
N of tweets	99,832	248,091	+ 148,259 (248.5 per cent)
N of users	8,987	48,784	+ 39,797 (542.8 per cent)

Table 22.2 Top Senders of Undirected Twitter Messages in #val2010 and #val2014

#val2010 top undirected senders	N of tweets	Type	#val2014 top undirected senders	N of tweets	Type
all_insane	1,932	Political satire	Denfinarasismen	1,270	Right-wing, anonymous
blogfia	618	Political blogger	niklassvensson	935	Journalist
AnnikaBeijbom	616	Liberal politician	MartinMoberg	680	Social Democrat supporter
Nemokrati	550	Anonymous	LeoBergmanz	475	Social Democrat politician
Pihlblad	544	Journalist	socialdemokrat	445	Social Democrats
Juditburda	392	Conservative politician	svtdinrost	441	PSB election feature
vpressfeldt	352	Student	Nyheterna	409	Commercial news program
MuzafferUnsal	345	Conservative politician	DagensArena	384	Left-progressive online news
mickep2	312	Journalist	AndersWester1	377	Right-wing supporter
skogskant	312	Anonymous	Fnordspotting	368	Political blogger

could be interpreted as a sign of Twitter becoming institutionalised or established: while use of Twitter in 2010 could be described as an individual initiative of media professionals, the situation four years later sees their respective media houses taking to this service to larger degrees instead.

Political supporters and party accounts of various persuasions are also represented. This tendency is primarily seen for #val2014, where anonymous right-wing supporters emerge as highly active in this regard. Focusing on the most active sender of undirected messages during this latter election, the Twitter handle *denfinarasismen* (Swedish for 'the acceptable racism') would suggest a non-mainstream standpoint on one of the hot topics in current Swedish societal debate: immigration policy (see also Larsson, 2014).

The only official party account found for both elections is @socialdemokrat, operated by the largest opposition party in 2010 and in 2014, the Social Democrats. For the latter election, Social Democrat supporters and individual politicians show up as well, giving merit to the claim that challengers will make use of online media to higher degrees than incumbents (e.g. Graham et al, 2013).

In sum, we find tweet volume as well as user numbers to have risen considerably during the period of study. This would, in isolation, signal a move towards establishing Twitter as a part of the arsenal of online platforms for political communication during election campaigns. Looking at the top senders of undirected messages, though, the impression is of a mixed bag—including anonymous accounts and political supporters—though the apparent development from individual journalist accounts in 2010 to media organisation accounts in 2014 could be taken as a tendency towards more established uses. Similarly, the presence of a party account (@socialdemokrat) could be seen as a sign of the increased perceived importance of Twitter also for firmly established actors—perhaps especially in challenger positions, as was the case for the latter of the two studied elections.

Dependence on Mainstream Media

The influence of mainstream or established media on Twitter can be assessed by studying the timelines of Twitter traffic, the idea being that if a media event became popular on the service under study, this would provide a visible upsurge in social media activity during the same timeframe. Figure 22.1 provides such timelines for both elections, effectively allowing us to gauge these influences.

The solid grey line in Figure 22.1 denotes activity for the 2010 hashtag, while the darker dotted line does so for the 2014 events. Accounting for obvious differences with

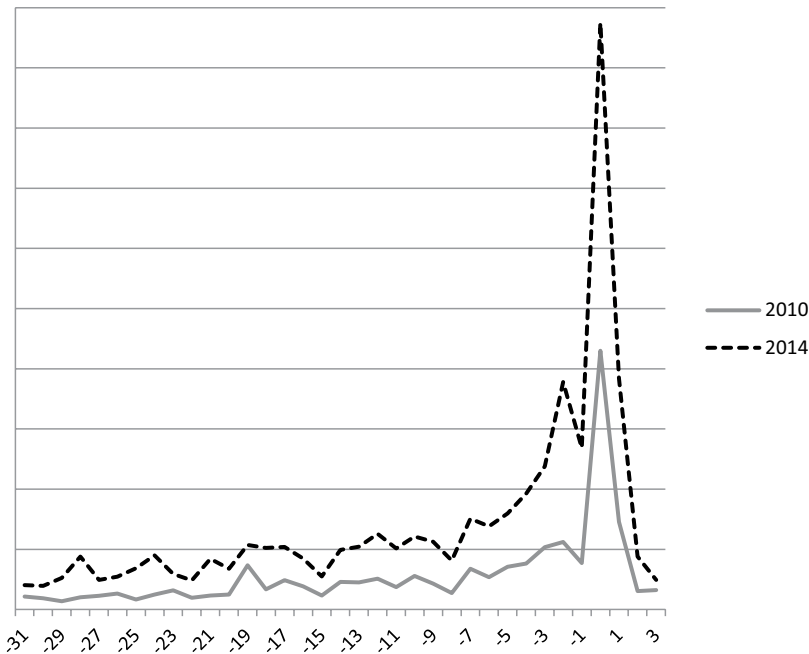


Figure 22.1 Distribution of Tweets over Time, Comparison of #val2010 and #val2014, 31 Days Prior to Election Day to 3 Days after Election Day; 2010 N = 99,311, 2014 N = 248,091

regards to volume of tweets, both timelines reach their highest peak during Election day. While the other peaks as visible in Figure 22.1 must be described as smaller in comparison, they nevertheless result in distinguishing marks for each line. With this in mind, the dependence on established mass media appears to take on similar forms for both elections. Consider the peaks visible in both lines at the -2 mark, indicating two days before the elections. Traditionally, this marks the day when the final debate between the leaders of all parliamentary parties is broadcast on SVT, the main Swedish public service television broadcaster. A significant event in contemporary election campaigns, it makes a clear mark also in Twitter traffic for both campaigns.

Similar tendencies can be discerned also when looking at other peaks visible in Figure 22.1. As an example from 2010, the increase visible at the -19 mark takes place on September 1 and corresponds to a debate between the Social Democrat and Conservative party leaders featured in the *Aktuellt* evening news, broadcast on the previously mentioned SVT network. Here, hashtag users react to and comment on the arguments proposed by the politicians, suggesting largely reflective tendencies. For example, hashtag users quote the party leaders in their tweets, effectively spreading what is said on screen to a potentially new forum. Besides such engagement with the actual content of the debate, comments are also posted regarding the appearances of the politicians, and, from each side of the political fence, who could be said to be the ‘winner’ of the televised event. For 2014, a similar televised debate involving the leaders of the two main parties appear to cause the upsurge that occurs one week from election day—at the -7 mark in Figure 22.1. Similarly, on the -19 mark, an upsurge in 2014 activity is made by Twitter users commenting on SVT’s traditional party leader interview program, on that date with the Swedish Democrats’ leader. Messages range from expressions of disappointment with the journalists to attempts at discussing rhetoric, and specific questions directed at the politician. Even though the broadcaster presents its own hashtag at the beginning of the program, at no point in the nearly hour-long segment is Twitter activity explicitly addressed or drawn into the discussion.

Such observations do not speak to the longitudinal flow of issues between social media and traditional media, but they do show that peaks in activity among those using Twitter for public communication about the election stem from reactive use related to television. These observations correspond with previous studies, largely finding that “the Internet reflects and amplifies other events” (Lilleker and Jackson, 2010, 93) rather than initiates them—a claim that finds support also in other, comparable contexts (e.g. Bruns and Highfield, 2013).

In sum, we find the major surges in the use of the selected hashtags to relate closely to mediated political events covered by mainstream traditional media. We find this correspondence in 2010 as well as 2014. The tendency for this criterion in isolation, then, is one *against* a more established pattern, as Twitter use (to a large extent) seems to be reactive to mainstream media agendas.

Relations between Active and Less Active Users

As a third criterion, we analyse the relations between those users who most often tweet employing the selected hashtags, and those who only rarely choose to take part in that manner. The term ‘active’ is here reserved as a label for the act of tweeting itself. Indeed, while other uses of Twitter, such as reading the messages sent by others, can trigger activities outside the platform (offline conversations or actions, or online

communication via other services), this definition and delimitation of active senders allows for a focus on specific roles taken on Twitter. By examining the relations between these user groups, we take one step beyond more general volume measurements, gaining a better understanding regarding different patterns of use.

Figure 22.2 details the relative intensity with which users of the studied hashtags took part in tweeting about each election. Figure 22.2 is inspired by Nielsen’s ‘90–9–1 rule’, which suggests that more often than not, online communities can be assumed to be made up of three overarching user groups with regards to each participant’s activity in the specified community (Nielsen, 2006). Ninety per cent of users belong to the least active group, contributing rarely, while the upper 10 per cent of users are divided into 9 per cent of highly active and a top 1 per cent of lead users, the latter contributing almost continuously. Figure 22.2, then, shows the result of analyses utilising computer scripts to detail the volume of tweets sent by each identified user group. While the percentages suggested by the 90–9–1 rule should not necessarily be expected to hold true in all empirical settings, this form of user group division can nevertheless be helpful in understanding the development of Twitter use.

Employing the scheme suggested in the legend, we can conclude that hashtagged Twitter activity during the two elections appears to have been dominated by the two more active groups. For both campaigns, a small 1 per cent minority produces 31.3 per cent (2010) and 31.4 per cent (2014) of the total amount of messages. This is not only an enormous volume but also a remarkably stable ratio. The corresponding numbers for the other two user groups show similar stability, though with a slight increase in the part produced by the least active group (from 29.5 per cent to 32.6 per cent).

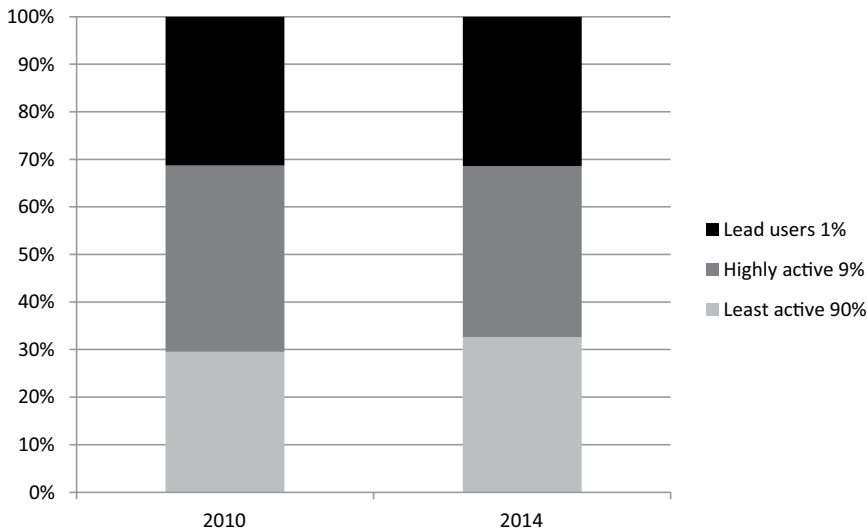


Figure 22.2 Distribution of Activity among Three User Groups (1 per cent lead users, 9 per cent highly active users, and 90 per cent least active users) as Percentages of the Total Number of Tweets Sent; 2010 $N = 99,348$ Tweets, 9,285 Users: 2014 $N = 248,091$ Tweets, 48,784 Users

In sum, the distribution of activity between most, less, and least active users remains the same in 2010 and 2014. We assumed that a development towards a more even distribution between the different groups would indicate a more mature or established use, since the dominance of techno-savvy early adopters would be diminished when larger user groups grew accustomed to the norms of the service, employing hashtags more actively. Our findings do not confirm such an assumption: a small group of very active users still make up a third of the Twitter messages for both hashtags, and the presence of a larger group of less active users cannot be found in this analysis. In isolation, then, our analysis on this third proposed measure points *against* a more established pattern of use.

Use of Redistributive Modes of Communication

Criterion four is about redistribution and who the top users who sent and received comparatively greater amounts of retweets are. Table 22.3 deals with the first of these groups.

While the presence of anonymous or non-elite users is felt in 2010, this tendency is enhanced in 2014, when several high end retweeters provide no or only very little information regarding their roles in civil society. As with our previous comparison of top @reply senders, we find some similarities between users and elections: specifically,

Table 22.3 Top Senders of Retweets for #val2010 and #val2014

#val2010 top retweeters	N	Types	#val2014 top retweeters	N	Types
Annoula64	3,969	Supporter, Pirate Party	nyborjaren	7,684	Anonymous
all_insane	1,179	Satirical	Annoula64	667	Supporter, Pirate Party
dreadnallen	302	Supporter, Feminist Party	gotlandsenahand	589	Account removed
AnnikaBeijbom	259	Politician, Liberal party	mattiasahlstrom	540	Anonymous
vpressfeldt	181	Student	JohnnyBrottom9	531	Anonymous
Nemokrati	180	Anonymous	Cruisingman88	522	Anonymous
MrQuispian	176	Supporter, Pirate Party	beckmansasikter	447	Conservative politician
Falkvinge	150	Politician, Pirate party	Harriet_Sthlm	388	Anonymous
annatroberg	146	Politician, Pirate party	Perkibaby	383	Anonymous
leoerlandsson	145	Supporter, Pirate Party	AnnaEval	375	Anonymous

the user @Annoula64, a supporter of the Pirate Party, emerges as energetic in this regard for both hashtags. Beyond the activity undertaken by this user, this type of frequent activity related to the Pirate Party appears to have diminished in the 2014 election, giving room instead to the aforementioned anonymous users, as well as traces of activities undertaken by an established politician—@beckmansasikter, a parliamentary representative from the conservative party.

Table 22.4 provides an overview of those users who received the most attention in this regard within both hashtags.

Amongst the users receiving frequent retweets, we clearly see how the dominance of journalists and Pirate Party associates in 2010 appears to have been broken in the period leading up to the 2014 elections. Indeed, while the Pirate Party account is featured also among the 2014 roster of high-end users, and while two journalists did make their mark in this regard (@niklassvensson and @Pihlblad), the distribution for 2014 appears as more varied than for 2010. Much as for top @reply receivers discussed previously, we see media organisations, rather than a multitude of journalists, emerge as

Table 22.4 Top Receivers of Retweets for #val2010 and #val2014

<i>#val2010 top retweeted</i>	N	Types	<i>#val2014 top retweeted</i>	N	Types
piratpartiet	1,228	Pirate Party	niklassvensson	9,338	Journalist
Pihlblad	521	Journalist	socialdemokrat	6,302	Social Democratic party
emanuelkarlsten	392	Journalist	RebeccaWUvell	3,643	Liberal debater, PR consultant
mickep2	335	Journalist	Expressen	2,426	Tabloid
SDopping	324	Journalist	svtdinrost	2,366	PSB election feature
danielswedin	318	Journalist	jonssonjessica	2,174	No personal info on profile page
nikkelin	310	IT Consultant	MXCartoons	1,474	Anonymous, Immigration critic
Falkvinge	309	Politician, Pirate Party	ozznujen	1,419	Comedian
annatroberg	307	Politician, Pirate Party	Pihlblad	1,418	Journalist
UlfBjereld	305	Professor of Political Science	piratpartiet	1,350	Pirate Party

successful in gaining retweets. Moreover, the presence of a well-known comedian—@ozznujen—reflects another tendency identified by similar research, where celebrities gain leverage in online political discussions (see Larsson and Moe, 2014).

In sum, discussing the fourth criterion, we find offline elites and elite Twitter users to get the most attention—more evidently so in 2014 compared with 2010. On the sender side, though, we still find less well-known users. In isolation, criterion four, concerning the use of redistributive modes of communication, signals a move towards more established patterns of use.

Ability for Non-Elite Users to Make an Impact

Finally, we address the fifth criterion, which relates to the possibilities of non-elite users to break through and get wide attention in the Twittersphere.

Based on Table 22.4, we identify what is here regarded as two non-elite users who succeeded in getting their tweets redistributed to high degrees in 2014. First, the person (or perhaps persons) responsible for the @MXCartoons account provides a statement, basically saying that the tweets will feature “common sense over political correctness,” which is crystallised by largely discussing and criticising Swedish immigration policy. Second, the influence of the user @jonssonjessica appears to have emanated from one tweet only. This particular tweet was sent on election night—lamenting the fact that the incumbent liberal-conservative government appeared to have lost the popular vote. We have found similar examples in other contexts. During the 2013 Norwegian election campaign, one such well-formulated and aptly-timed tweet from a non-elite user, otherwise not central to the hashtagged Twitter debate, gained wide attention—if only briefly (Larsson and Moe, 2014). Apart from these two examples, the top list of retweeted users from both election periods under study show only well-known figures.

This final criterion deals with individual examples of lesser-known users with few followers and a sparse network who managed to break through and get heard in the Twittersphere by way of extensive retweeting. Though we identify only a limited number of such examples, we would argue that they illustrate how the Swedish political Twittersphere still lacks the volume and intensity that would hinder the emergence of someone coming out of nowhere, so to speak. The fact that both our examples are from the 2014 data, while we find no similar episodes in 2010, strengthen the impression that the fifth criterion in isolation shows that Twitter use in our context has not moved towards an established pattern of use.

Conclusion

This chapter has presented findings of a comparative study of political Twitter use during two consecutive election campaigns in Sweden, with the aim of providing insights into how such use develops over time. As an analytical framework, we identified five different criteria, which in sum should enable a scrutiny of the extent to which, and how, Twitter use went from emergent status in 2010 to more established in 2014.

We found the first criterion—volume of tweets and users—to signal a move towards established use. The second criterion, covering reactive use in relation to mainstream media, pointed in the opposite direction, as it depicted Twitter as an emerging platform in the sense of still depending to a large extent on the agenda of televised

political events. Similarly, our third feature, which looked at the distribution of activity among different user groups, found no change from 2010 to 2014, which is an argument against any notion of a more established pattern of use. Fourth, when looking at the use of dialogic and redistributive modes of communication, we identified a move towards more established patterns of use. This was somewhat contradicted by the final criterion, which identified individual successes at getting heard across the Twittersphere from a position outside the densely networked elite of users. Taken together, our criteria do not allow for a clear answer to whether or not Twitter use has moved towards a more established mode between the two Swedish elections. However, the findings on several criteria that show strong similarities between 2010 and 2014 suggest that we should be careful not to overstate the role of Twitter during election campaigns: it remains hard to grasp its uses, and it seems that important aspects remain in an emergent status.

Applying the approach presented here—a set of criteria which can be used to assess the developmental stage of specific online communication platforms in the context of a wider national media ecology—to other cases, in other cultural and political contexts, based on other technological groundings, and in other time periods, would help us to develop better knowledge of the mechanisms at work when new media platforms turn into staples of everyday political communication.

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