

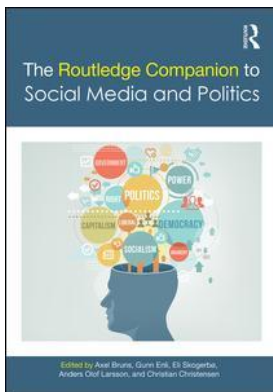
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### **The 2012 French Presidential Campaign**

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# THE 2012 FRENCH PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN

## First Steps into the Political Twittersphere

*Françoise Papa and Jean-Marc Francony*

### Introduction

The French 2012 presidential election was marked by the emergence of Twitter as a tool which appeared, in the eyes of commentators, to be the main innovation of the campaign. Twitter was especially promoted by the candidates' teams and the media, who made 'real time' a new imperative in the media coverage of the campaign. The first result of this trend was a sharp increase in the publishing activity on Twitter, growing as election day and its uncertain result approached. Activists and, more broadly, the supporters of candidates invaded the space of debate on Twitter. This activism, which took various forms, reflected the vitality of social networks and their now inevitable role in public debate. The more traditional spaces of online information and political debate, such as websites and blogs, were overshadowed by Twitter, a reactive medium allowing for instantaneous communication which proved complementary to traditional mass media, and particularly to television.

This raised new questions for the field of political communication and the analysis of public opinion (Gerstlé & Magni Berton, 2014). The spread of Web 2.0 environments facilitated the emergence of new forms of interaction through networking, shaking up hierarchies and traditional institutional boundaries. In particular, traditional media were no longer the sole conduit for candidates aiming to control their end-to-end communication, which in turn also explains (at least partially) their enthusiasm for social networks. The logic of *eventization* (Coudry, Hepp, & Krotz, 2010) also contributed to the success of Twitter, as the 'mainstream' media were permanently on the lookout for content exchanged on social networks that might make news. Finally, Twitter created a space where public figures could be permanently visible commenting on news in real time, and at the same time creating live stories around themselves.

During an election campaign, participation in public debate first entails the mobilisation of partisan systems associated with the candidates. This so-called institutional activism aims to set the framework for interactions and modes of contribution to the

public debate, in which activists, political supporters, and citizens are encouraged to participate. These institutional arrangements are generally associated with the Twitter accounts of the candidates as well as with those of their campaign teams and parties. They can be linked, to varying degrees, to spaces facilitated by communities with similar viewpoints, which are indicative of changes in the forms of activism and political debate brought about by online communication (de Zúñiga et al., 2009; Monnoyer-Smith & Wojcik, 2014).

The first challenge, for each candidate, is to obtain the participation of numerous publics and hence expand the dominant public sphere. In an *attention economy*, this also means pre-empting a communication space which becomes essential for the media through its activity and popularity. To gain influence, the organisation of this space is essential: this involves the organisation of activists on the network to multiply their impact on citizens and relies on agents with specialised skills in the facilitation and organisation of communities. Mediators that come from media or politics are enlisted to relay influence in the public sphere. We analyse these forms of network activism in this chapter.

Our analysis of the activity on Twitter that we recorded continuously over four months of the presidential campaign (from mid-January 2012 to mid-May 2012) allowed us to characterise the networks of relations and actors as well as their modes of expression on social networks. We present below the main findings from this case study.

### Twitter Invites Itself to the Campaign

In 2012, the main concerns of the French in the lead-up to the election were the economic and financial crisis with its impact on employment, purchasing power, pensions, the education system and health care. On the eve of the first round of the election, the credibility ratings for François Hollande (Socialist Party—*Parti Socialiste*, or PS) were high in relation to his policies to reduce unemployment and social inequality and to re-enforce the defence of social rights. As for the candidate Nicolas Sarkozy, the incumbent French president (of the main right party—*Union pour un Mouvement Populaire*, or UMP), his credibility ratings remained high in areas such as law and order and the fight against illegal immigration. Fifteen days before the first round, pollsters' forecasts gave the socialists 45 per cent per cent of the vote. In the second-round run-off election, Hollande continued to be seen as the likely winner despite a rise in the popularity of Nicolas Sarkozy. However, the outcome remained uncertain due to uncertainty about the second-round voting intentions of the supporters of the four candidates who had received a substantial share of the vote (all over 14 per cent) at the first round.<sup>1</sup>

Sarkozy was squeezed between Hollande on his left, who was leading the race, the French Nationalist Party (*Front National*, FN) led by Marine Le Pen on his right, and François Bayrou, the candidate of the *Mouvement Démocratique* (MoDem), in the centre. As for François Hollande, he had to deal with the growing popularity of Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the candidate representing the radical left, *Le Front de Gauche* (FDG), while his main political allies in the environmental party (*Europe Ecologie Les Verts*, EELV) collapsed in the polls. The mobilisation of support with the aim of influencing the electorate would therefore play a major role in keeping Hollande's lead or, conversely, in reducing the gap between Nicolas Sarkozy and his main opponent.

These two candidates were not confronted by any specific events that were likely to have significant impacts on the balance of power over the campaign. Each candidate

had to impose their agenda on the media to obtain the broadest possible coverage of their campaign. This period was punctuated by rallies, primarily in support of the candidates, and their appearances and statements in the media especially during their daily commutes and visits as well as in debates organised by the television channels.

As far as the use of social networks was concerned, all of the presidential candidates had expanded their communication to the Web and social networks, with varying levels of success. Their Twitter and Facebook accounts were linked to their official campaign sites; they were permanently connected and were able to cater to all types of usage, notably mobile use. The candidates also professionalised their use of social networks in general, with the help of teams of professional Web specialists and activists. This was done to varying degrees depending on their resources: both Sarkozy and Hollande officially declared having dedicated two million out of approximately 21 million euros to their Web campaign.

Our analysis of their editorial activity was based on a Twitter data set which focussed on the candidates' campaign accounts. We continuously collected—within the limits of what the Twitter Application Programming Interface would provide—a body of nearly two million tweets produced by, sent to, or mentioning at least one of the candidates. This collection provided a framework which was completed by studies of specific micro-events throughout the campaign—such as televised debates, identified by their hashtags, which generated large audiences.

### **Publication Activity Strongly Influenced by the Main Events of the Campaign**

Within the limits of the representativeness of the data, the analysis of posting activity over the election period provided a clear picture of the dynamics of the campaign and showed how the candidates' communication built up over time. In particular, it highlighted the intensification of Sarkozy's communication activities between the two rounds of the election.

It was notable that the candidates' communication patterns were far from identical, notably as far as intensity is concerned; the resources mobilised differed, their audiences were not the same, reflecting the differences in their positions of the contest. The volume of publication activity varied with key moments that marked the activities of the candidates in social networks. The entry into the campaign is signalled by mass conventions in which candidates give speeches on their programmes: those of François Hollande (Le Bourget, 22 January 2012) and Nicolas Sarkozy (Villepinte, 11 March 2012) triggered considerable posting activity on Twitter. The campaign events which followed (Hollande scheduled 12 rallies, Sarkozy 10) correspond to moments of high activity on Twitter.

Generally speaking, there is a direct relationship between campaign events covered by the media and publishing activity on Twitter. This mainly concerns the televised debates between candidates (four debates took place over the last month of the campaign) and public rallies broadcast on television. These events strongly mobilised social networks and led to battles or 'retaliation parties' between supporters and opponents of the candidates, whose performances were commented upon in real time.

The key moments of the campaign were also linked to the media agenda that was sometimes imposed on the candidates or even thwarted their communication. A tragic episode, the Merah case<sup>2</sup> illustrated the emergence of news in the presidential campaign,

which temporarily resulted in a dramatic reduction of posting activity on Twitter, the accounts of the candidates having been put on standby.

The study of content over this period confirmed that Twitter was fully involved in the information cycle, alongside the mass media. The media events and the volume of activity on Twitter were linked, regardless of whether the event was imposed on the candidates or whether it was generated as part of their communication strategies. Twitter was an echo chamber and an extension of the public media space that candidates aimed to use to their best interests.

Finally, by virtue of the event creation logic, actors developed viral strategies, the purpose of which was to cross over into the mainstream media in order to be more widely disseminated. These observations confirmed the analyses establishing the role of Twitter as a backchannel to live television, an extension of large-audience television, and an element in creating live audiences in real time (Harrington et al., 2012; Highfield et al., 2013).

A contextualisation of posting activity on Twitter in relation to external media events during the campaign or to specific events in the electoral contest (such as chat shows) more accurately captures these interrelationships. The examination of interactions between a televised debate and simultaneous content production on Twitter shows a relationship between the words spoken by a candidate and the increase in posts on Twitter reacting to them. The activity on Twitter is closely correlated to micro-sequences in the broadcast which crystallise opposition, and opinions that find their echo in the mobilised network. Twitter was also an indicator of the sensitivity of audiences to certain topics of discussion, which do not all generate the same volume of messages.

### Differentiated Modes of Use

Far from being a forum disconnected from institutional points of view, or from the supporters' points of view, Twitter was used both by candidates and supporters' organisations whose online interventions helped structure the exchange. The analysis of interactions and communication provides information on the intensity and the modes of participation in the public debate as well as on the involvement of participants.

Posting activity on Twitter was effectively based on the political agendas of the candidates, but their investment in the social network was variable and unequal. These differences are a logical extension of their previous positions (Papa, 2007; Francony & Papa, 2014; Greffet & Wojcik, 2008) and of the communication habits of the parties that support them (Theviot, 2013). So, Facebook was at the core of Sarkozy's Web communication activities, while Twitter was used mostly as a channel for the dissemination of information, with very little interactivity. His strategy was to present himself first and foremost on his Facebook page.<sup>3</sup>

Hollande communicated mainly via dedicated websites ([francoishollande.fr](http://francoishollande.fr) and [toushollande.fr](http://toushollande.fr)) to which the cloud of Socialist Party websites was linked, and via Twitter. Twitter was used in service of Hollande's communication and the mobilisation of his supporters: it provided convenient tools to relay his campaign in a more interactive way with the aim of involving supporters and facilitating their online participation in the campaign and on the ground. Hollande entrusted a community manager to coordinate a team of Web content curators. Their tasks were to aggregate the messages that supporters were invited to post and to organise responses to the statements of other

candidates. Romain Pigenel, in charge of the digital mobilisation during the campaign, explains this strategy:

One can join the “TousHollande” sphere by creating an account on the website and connecting your personal blog or Twitter account. From that moment on, the platform supports several functions. First, to make the community of bloggers that support François Hollande (which is up to this point scattered and non-quantifiable) visible, and enable them to know each other. Second, to highlight their posts without interfering with the official communication disseminated through François Hollande’s institutional website. Third, to create motivation and emulation by publishing rankings of the most effective and influential twittos and bloggers in the campaign. Fourth, to discover and empower via these rankings, the twittos and bloggers of great value that are outside the usual groups of the Socialist Party. Then, last but not least, to make innovative tools available to this community to facilitate their action and make their support public.

(Pigenel, 2011: para. 4)

The National Front, for its part, based its communication around its candidate, Marine Le Pen, by meshing a multitude of websites around the official campaign website and its Facebook accounts. These websites were run by supporters who could register their blogs, and be labelled with an official logo as a participant in *La Toile Bleu Marine* (‘Blue Marine Network’). This organic set-up evolved over the duration of the campaign. Its focus was on the interconnection of existing resources on the Web, and to a large extent it ignored Twitter, which was not used much by the voters and supporters of Marine Le Pen.

These differences can be explained in part by the structure of the various supporter networks and the number of active connections in the each of them. Posting activity over the campaign was organised through the intervention of key actors such as network facilitators, community managers, activists, and to a lesser extent the supporters of the candidates.

To compare the total activity of the candidates, we studied the number of posts produced over time (based on calculations of hourly presence ratios and average flow intensity). Over the 15 days preceding the first ballot, the volumes of posts emphasised strong commitment by the supporters of the MoDem and the environmental group EELV, and a modest share of the Socialist Party.

The various categories of accounts studied (candidate, community, and party) do not contribute equally to the debate for each candidate. As stated before, Hollande’s community manager benefited from significant autonomy in managing communication, notably within the ‘TousHollande’ environment. Sarkozy’s personal Twitter account played the premier role and was the most active account (in the number of posts and in the frequency of its use) in the campaign; his very centralised and vertical communication approach was centred largely on his personal charisma and strong personality.

The activity of the different networks was not homogeneous over the period. Though the activity of the Socialist candidate was globally stable, the results of the first round of the election had a notable impact on the activity of the other candidates’ campaigns. There was a significant increase in the UMP’s activity over the two weeks between rounds, whereas almost symmetrically there was a corresponding collapse in the activity

of both the MoDem and the EELV, with the radical left FDG decreasing as well, though less markedly. The period between the first and second rounds led to a polarisation of discussions, focussing on the battle between Sarkozy and Hollande.

Twitter quickly became an important tool in deploying the strategies of the candidates whose objectives were to reach media saturation through the permanent occupation of the Twittersphere by means of a continuous production of messages. It became clear that there was a need to organise the monitoring of content on the network in order for the candidates to be able to react through communication or through their campaign teams. This was also necessary in order to keep a close eye on events and to ensure the mobilisation of their Twitter followers and supporters.

To understand the candidates' communication strategies during the campaign, we identified and characterised the key participants in the discussion on Twitter. Mapping their networks of relationships allowed us, in a second phase, to analyse the forms of mobilisation of activists on Twitter.

### **A Forum for Debate Structured by Supporter Networks**

Candidates made up the core of the study, from which we characterised the political affiliations and political preferences of the contributors to the discussions on Twitter. Whenever it was possible we did this by using the biographies posted on Twitter accounts, so that we were able to identify the core contributors and their political affiliations. We looked for "remarkable" contributors that we characterised in terms of their communication activity in relation to their position in the network (notably their connector function, which was identified from the analysis of retweets).

We then built up a representation of the interactions between these points, and studied the graphs built from the relationships expressed in the tweets. Thus we identified affinities between individuals of the same political affiliation and/or relationships between those with opposing views. We have also made visible the relations of these core actors and the clouds of points that we were not, at first, able to position explicitly on the political spectrum. Our hypothesis, continuing from the pioneering work of Adamic (Adamic and Glance 2005), was that there were similar opinions between these categories of actors.

An earlier analysis of tweets mentioning a political party and associated accounts during an election period, carried out by Feller et al. (2011), aimed to update the participants' network structure with the exchanges sorted along the lines of their political preferences and their subjects of discussion. This study, following on from the work of Conover et al. (2011), confirmed that Twitter users interested in politics tend to follow peers who share the same opinions, although according to Bode et al. (2011) and An et al. (2011), Twitter and other social networks provide opportunities to access more diverse political opinions.

The map of relations that we established confirmed the results of this earlier research, and confirmed the phenomenon of political polarisation on Twitter. The forum of relations that developed on Twitter over the 2012 campaign was, at first analysis, structured by the proximity of the political opinions of the Twitter users, whose activity in the network, however, remained far from uniform or homogeneous. These disparities were not specific to the theme that drives conversations, in our case politics; whatever the interests under discussion, only a minority of Twitter users produce content for a wide audience, while most of them only follow conversations, or interact within limited

groups of acquaintances.<sup>4</sup> Variations occur in the intensity of activity, the type of activity, and the structure of the networks of relationships that develop around or concern a candidate.

We referred earlier to the different positions of the candidates, and their impact on the use of social networks: a comparison of the structures of the networks of relationships of each candidate, based on the retweet activity analysis between two rounds of the presidential election, is significant in this respect. For example, the communication strategies deployed by Hollande have a star-shaped configuration whose centre has two parts: @TousHollande and @fhollande were in a reciprocal relationship. This core ensures the cohesion of the whole set-up, so that the clouds of official websites of the Socialist Party link to this double heart. The EELV and FDG set-ups also have star-shaped structures that are focused solely on their candidates who ensure, alone, the cohesion of their systems. On the other hand, the relationship between the accounts of Sarkozy and the UMP, his own party, was very distant, as the candidate only rarely relayed any of the party's content.

Some common factors appeared, however: whatever the structure adopted, community managers are located at the interface of three subnetworks (party, candidate, communities) and ensure a link between them. Some of them (R. Pigenel—PS; A. Champremier-Trigano—FDG) also engaged publicly through their own Twitter accounts. These results are consistent with the work of Ausserhofer and Maireder (2013) and emphasise the importance of professional politicians and political communication in the facilitation and organisation of political exchanges on Twitter. Finally, relationships appeared between the campaign networks, a fact which addresses the strategic need that requires 'bridges' between the candidacies, and a discursive reality involving the opposing discourses in the construction of an identity and unique position for each candidate.

### A Forum That Structures the Political Debate

During the campaign, the political Twittersphere is mainly structured by the publishing activities of supporters and of political institutions, but it is also a forum that provides structure. In our analysis of publishing activity, we identified circles of participants with increasing levels of involvement in debates (see Figure 27.1).

Our analysis of retweets highlighted the support logics at work in the Twittersphere over the election campaign. First, the existence of politicised cores with networks supporting the candidacy indicated a high level of activity as well as the efficient relaying carried out by community activists. Second, it revealed the logics of reciprocity at work within these communities, which in turn shows the internal cohesion of the group. This cohesion was such that the community structure—identified using social network analysis methods—persisted even when the nodes associated with candidates and the institutional systems that support them (community managers, party venues, etc.) were eliminated from the retweet graph.

Twitter has also proven to be an organising tool for mobilising and influencing beyond the core supporters, particularly during key moments of the campaign, such as during televised debates that offer opportunities for online expression remarkable in both volume and intensity. It also helped organise the work of supporters in the field and incite people to participate both in candidates' rallies and in public debates. Finally, Twitter contributed to the construction of a common discourse around the candidates.



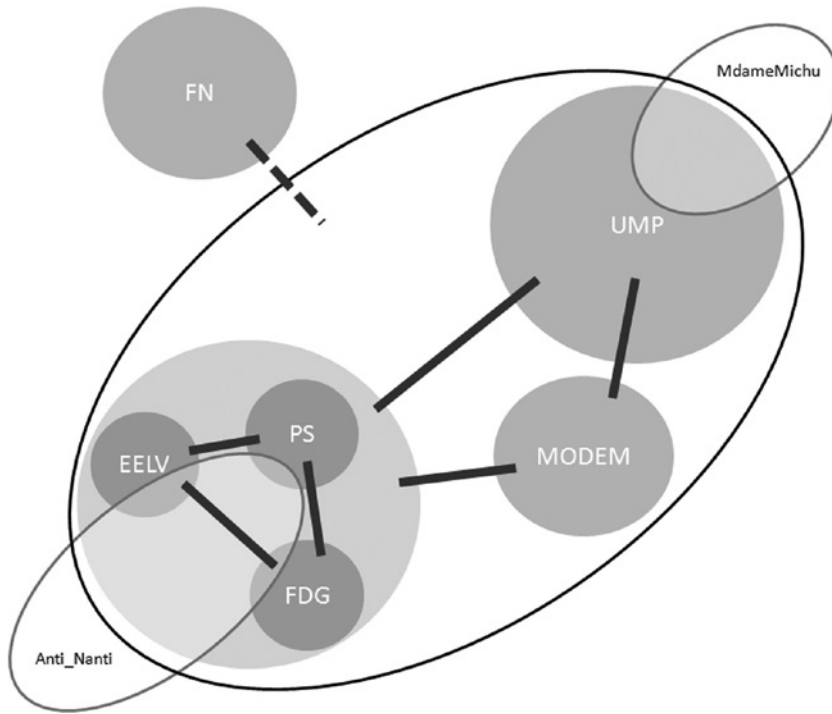


Figure 27.1 Diagram Illustrating the Political Polarities Identified from the Analysis of Content on Twitter over the 2012 Campaign

In the vicinity of clearly defined political communities, we identified another two very cohesive communities. These communities with similar opinions had developed their own posting activities but were not apparently significantly linked to any political party, though they did channel some of the editorial activity. Further analysis of these structures showed that each has a strong identity, based on the left-right political divide.

Channelled by the specific hashtags #Anti\_Nanti (AgainstNob), #MdamMichu (MrsBrown), and attributed to accounts of the same names, @Anti\_Nanti and @MdamMichu function as an antagonistic dipole. Without claiming any partisan label, each community has emerged through its opposition to the ideological positions of the candidates of the adverse party, rather than through the affirmation of what characterised their preferred candidates. Despite this off-party positioning, an analysis of the community structure of MdamMichu revealed three sub-communities close to the UMP political machinery. The largest group (52.4 per cent) was the first circle centred on the MdamMichu account, in which public figures from the entertainment world had a special place. The second group (29 per cent) were young right-wing activists and members of youth organisations (JeunePop, UNI, etc.), and was organised around several UMP activists, acting as community managers. The third group (18.6 per cent) corresponded to the interfaces with other supporter networks. From the political categorisation we conducted on a thousand accounts, it appeared that 88 per cent of actors

in the community core showed a tendency to support the UMP. More generally, those with strong involvement in the network were engaged in a form of proclaimed radical anti-left militancy, as shown by the analysis of their biographies.

Using the same method for reconstructing upstream retweet graphs, we also found four sub-communities within Anti\_Nanti whose members had more diverse party affiliations. The four groups were distributed as follows: 30 per cent MoDem, 29 per cent PS, 13.6 per cent UMP, and 9 per cent FDG. The largest group (45.7 per cent) was not centred on Anti\_Nanti. It included several accounts that expressed opinions to the left, ranging from the Socialist Party further left to the FDG, with various levels of radicalism in their expression. The second group (27.6 per cent) was driven by a core clearly aligned with the FDG, also very active on social networks. Within the third group (19.9 per cent), the opinions of individuals were clearly on the left but with no claims of belonging to left-wing parties. The last group (6.8 per cent) did not maintain close connections with the network and seemed rather to play a peripheral interface role with others.

Although they share a common 'anti' orientation, these two communities differ in two respects: their core does not have the same relationship to the political machines, and their members, aggregated in sub-communities, are distributed differently across the political spectrum. For the UMP, the lack of reciprocal retweet relations between the campaign organisation and M<sup>dame</sup>Michu suggests that it was an autonomous set-up, although interlinking was very strong between the M<sup>dame</sup>Michu network and institutional clouds around the UMP candidate. The analysis shows a very strong representation of UMP supporters within the M<sup>dame</sup>Michu community. In a different manner, Anti\_Nanti feeds on the activities of the left-wing networks, and especially the FDG candidate. This diversity of relayed content positioned the group that aggregated it as an interface of left-wing opinions for both the PS and the EELV, federating opinions directed against the incumbent president Nicolas Sarkozy and his party.

These results, although partial, support the observation that there has been a progressive diversification in the forms of political engagement and participation on the Web over the past decade. In the context of the election, this non-institutional use of Twitter is less a response to the need for more extensive and diversified information than to the need to monitor political news, the need for self-expression, and the need to construct of a collective identity. The analysis of messages exchanged in these communities, as well as of the way they were formalised, confirms this.

### **Enunciation Modes That Are Both Significant and Remarkable**

Twitter logic tends to reduce the diversity of the publication forms produced by its users. This normative logic is reinforced by the strategic goals of communication, whose aim is to address the broadest possible audience. Consequently, looking for patterns in the forms of expression as well as in the structure of the interventions enables us to understand the mechanisms and tactics that are being used, and hence to obtain a better understanding of the contribution of Twitter as a communicative environment. It also facilitates the characterisation of the actors and their roles in structuring the Twitter-sphere in the context of the event.

First, this normalisation intervenes in the way that the actors involved in the political debate are referenced. Referring to individuals by using their Twitter username enables users to fuel the public flow of information which is associated with them. This

way of referencing an individual with no possible ambiguity was widely favoured during the campaign when designating the candidates in tweets. This contributes to the association of the various publication forums with the candidates, and in this way sets up the political reference area for the campaign on Twitter.

Over and above the normative aspects, the linking of an account to another account, perceived as the transposition of interpersonal relationships into the Twittersphere, promotes the idea of proximity. This aspect is integrated into the communication strategies of the leading candidates who associate their names with accounts likely to speak out for them.

Spontaneous indexing supported by hashtags is another element of this normalisation. As far as the nomination of candidates is concerned, here it is necessary to distinguish between the strict patronymic constructions that are formally equivalent to the addresses of accounts (*#hollande*, *#sarkozy*), and the qualifying constructions (nicknames, diminutives, etc.) which provide scope for more creativity. Creativity is rather expressed through various constructions representing positive voting instructions (*#lepenvite*, *#avecsarkozy*, *#votezmélenchon*) or negative statements (*#stopsarkozy*, *#nohollande*). Another type of construction aims to build aphorisms, puns and other slogans, essentially disqualifying the concerned candidates (*#lolhollande*, *#lafrancemolle*).

Second, standardisation is also involved in structuring messages. The order of the components of a message, partly inherited from the recommendations of use and the evolution of Twitter, provides a widely adopted framework for Twitter users. One of the most important aspects concerns the author citation and reference mechanism that can be considered as a generalisation of the republication mechanism. Unlike verbatim republication through “button” retweeting, citation allows the inclusion of external elements such as reported speech or fragments of tweets that can also be considered as elements of speech.

Throughout the campaign, we found that the quotes and retweets were particularly stable markers for identifying the elements of the candidates’ political communication. Implemented by the campaign teams and close circles around the supporters, these messages build the longest chains of retweets. Diffusing especially effectively throughout the networks of supporters, they help convey the elements of speech essential to the persuasive communication of the candidates. We also measured a very strong correlation between candidates’ citations and the simultaneous presence of hashtags encouraging people to vote.

During televised debates, the production of this type of message is remarkable, both by the published content and the timing of publication. In addition to the language elements that are taken directly from the candidates’ discourse, extracts of programmes, blogs, interviews and URLs pointing to multimedia documentary resources and related to the candidates’ speeches are also made available. The astonishing speed (less than one minute) between giving the speech and the dissemination of the tweets suggests that these often complex elements may be prepared beforehand. Sometimes, some messages allowed other candidates to enter into the ongoing debate on the TV show, although they were not physically present on the set, thereby enabling their reintroduction into the public discussion.

Based on the structure of the quote they complement, we identified the structure of the comments which enabled the authors of the tweet to position themselves in relation to its content. Comments played a significant role, equivalent to those of the quotes which they can complete or complement or to which they can reply. The length of

tweets does not allow for long development in the comments; rather, it provides support or conversely sanctions the quoted content using incisive language or one good word.

The candidates' words were widely commented upon on Twitter: the comment, though it remains the prerogative of politicians, journalists and experts, was also largely used by supporters in a fashion more or less coordinated with the campaign. Therefore, during the televised debates, many comments were produced both to bring new or contradictory elements to the subjects under discussion and to respond to quotes published by the opposing camps. Twitter was used to re-enforce the persuasive communication of the candidates by disseminating quotes from the candidates' speeches, by producing ready-made arguments and by enriching the messages with Web content.

Twitter also provided a forum of expression unique in both form and mode. Sheltering their editorial activity behind an avatar whose virtual identity is easily understandable, the 'antis' have channelled and stimulated the expression of opinions free of the constraints of form and language, moving towards transgressive forms of political expression. This expressivist new form of activism helps diversify political discussion on the networks by setting free individual speech. Throughout the campaign, Anti\_Nanti and MdamMichu functioned like fora where almost instantaneous responses to the events of the campaign were organised and where messages disparaging political opponents were generated. Types of expression, like lampooning, emerged which were far from, if not in breach of, the institutional political speeches of the candidates and their political setups. As a transgressive genre both polemical and incisive, the objective of a lampoon is to get people to react and to cause an event (Hastings et al. 2009), whilst official campaigning devices remain regulated by their political machinery: they are now articulated with spaces where opinions can be given in discursive forms favouring comments to simple quotes, and where, often, invective competes with caricature.

### Conclusion

During the 2012 presidential election, candidates' communication strategies evolved and integrated Twitter as a new tool and a new space. This feature was used in particular with the aim of saturating media space during the key events in the candidates' agendas. The effectiveness of these devices relied heavily on the involvement of the Web professionals with whom parties or candidates surrounded themselves.

We have highlighted the fact that the space of political debate on Twitter is structured in line with the communication strategies of the institutional actors involved in the election campaign, but also under the influence of *ad hoc* communities that are opportunistically associating themselves closely with the political event. Our study shows, however, that there remain significant differences between partisan institutional organisations: these differences lie in the organisational cultures of the parties, and the need to adapt to a configuration of communication where candidates are supported by a federal structure of supporter groups, but where a posture of strong leadership remains possible.

The Twittersphere has emerged as a new territory for politics to colonise, bringing with it new forms of implications for supporters and a new audience to conquer. The community managers were key players in the structuring of the audience, facilitating community activists around the institutional organisations of their candidates. Their role was also found to be that of an interface with peer communities that had similar

opinions but were not linked to the institutional frameworks. The communities observed around MdamMichu or Anti\_Nanti are illustrative of these aggregation phenomena.

Analysis of the content posted by the members of these two communities showed that their comments are not led by the candidates' official communication activities. Nevertheless, the spontaneity of these networks can be questioned considering the fact that key players in the active core of these communities have a strong commitment to a candidate or party. This type of intervention in the area of political debate, apparently disconnected from partisan institutional arrangements, has several advantages: it can access a public resistant to all active support whilst developing a political discourse, and broaden the modes of political expression through less conventional forms and content. Advancing 'masked', in a sense, may ultimately be, as one of the riposte strategies, a way of ensuring the broader dissemination of proposals and ideas for a candidate. This may re-enforce a sense of belonging to a community of ideas, identify contributors who may ultimately join the official supporter structures, and in this way collect resources that could potentially be mobilised in the political contest.

Activism on social networks, in whatever forms it takes, challenges the regulatory principles of the electoral contest as applied for example to equal access to the media for all candidates. It opens up new questions about the conditions of democratic public debate, and therefore about the factors which contribute to the development of political opinion, notably as it appears on Twitter as a poorly regulated space still marked by uneven social take-up.

### Notes

- 1 The results of the first round confirmed an advantage to the left, with a combined vote share of 44 per cent. Hollande received 28.6 per cent of the vote, Sarkozy 27.2 per cent, Le Pen 17.9 per cent and Mélenchon 11.1 per cent. In the second round Hollande won with 51.6 per cent of the vote against 48.4 per cent for Sarkozy.
- 2 The case involved three gun attacks targeting French soldiers and Jewish civilians in March 2012. In total, seven people were killed and five others were injured. The perpetrator, Mohammed Merah, a 23-year-old French petty criminal of Algerian descent, was shot and killed after a 30-hour siege with police. Merah attacked French Army personnel reportedly because of their involvement in the war in Afghanistan. Merah admitted anti-Semitic motivations and said he attacked the Jewish school because "the Jews kill our brothers and sisters in Palestine."
- 3 The number of people who had 'liked' Nicolas Sarkozy on Facebook by the eve of the first round of the presidential election was 689,344, whereas François Hollande had only around 350,000 fans. In France, Facebook has 26 million monthly active users; Twitter, 2.3 million.
- 4 "Nearly six out of 10 active Twittos reported reading Twitter accounts (other than their own) at least once every two days (59%), 31% several times a day. However, only a third (33%) issue tweets at least once every two days, only 13% emit tweets several times a day. Twitter therefore appears more as a means of communicating information" (Ipsos, 2013: para. 4).

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