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## **ADOPTION AND ADAPTATION: DIACHRONIC PERSPECTIVES ON THE GROWING SOPHISTICATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA USES IN ELECTIONS CAMPAIGNS**

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Much like the Internet itself during the mid-1990s, social media such as Twitter and Facebook have now become standard tools in a number of professional contexts. In doing so, they have undergone gradual processes of adoption and adaptation, as their potential uses are explored, evaluated, and revised over time, and as the insights gained by early adopters are disseminated to other potential users. But because of the slow and incremental nature of such adoption and adaptation processes, they are often overlooked by social media research which examines single cases and phenomena.

Such tendencies are perhaps most evident in relation to the study of political elections: here, the effective use of social media by the successful Obama campaign in the 2008 US presidential election is often positioned as an obvious starting point for mainstream political uses of contemporary social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, creating the impression that its strategies emerged fully formed rather than themselves building on the lessons learnt from previous campaigns, and that subsequent campaigns merely needed to copy Obama's successful formula in their own electioneering efforts (e.g. Miller, 2013). Such simplistic perspectives overlook, however, that each election campaign proceeds from its own underlying factors (such as the persona of the candidate and their position in the polls) and that the idiosyncratic US electoral system diverges vastly from those of most other parliamentary democracies (thus requiring very different campaigning styles). What worked for Obama - campaigning for direct election in a two-person contest where voting is voluntary - is unlikely to work in a multi-party system whose leaders are indirectly elected and where voting is compulsory, for example (e.g. Gibson & McAllister, 2014).

There is, therefore, a significant need for research into social media campaigning strategies beyond the US context, and over the past years AoIR and other conferences have already seen a substantial number of such studies being presented. However, the bulk of research into these issues has continued to be designed as single-country or single-election case studies, providing useful findings but lacking a longitudinal,

diachronic, or comparative perspective that would be able to trace any developmental trends in political social media use between or during elections. This panel seeks to remedy this dearth of research by featuring several diachronic approaches to the study of online political communication during elections, and by thus enabling a comparative perspective on the gradual adoption and adaptation of social media for political campaigning across a range of national contexts. Specifically, the panel presents research into the political uses of social media for campaigning in four different countries: Australia, Sweden, the USA, and Italy. In combination, these four presentations provide an overview over a diverse range of contexts, and offer new insights into the ways that electoral and political systems as well as the current political standing of key parties and candidates affect the evolution of social media campaigning strategies.

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## Paper I: Comparing Social Media Use During Two Swedish Elections

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Much of the hype surrounding social media and their uses for electoral purposes has originated from a US context. While the technological infrastructures and affordances associated with services like Facebook and Twitter remain largely the same across political contexts, the actual use of these services tend to differ in some regard from country to country (e.g. Karlsen, 2012). We could also expect to find such differences from one election to another within one specific country. The current paper, then, details such diachronic developments by presenting analyses of social media use by parties and citizens during two consecutive elections for the Swedish parliament – the *Riksdag*. Given the country's "avant-garde position regarding Internet access" and consistent high scores of voting attendance (Gustafsson, 2012: 1111), the Swedish context arguably becomes especially interesting to study in this regard. The fact that Swedish parties and politicians appear to have been early adopters of online technologies for campaigning purposes (Gibson, 2004) makes such a focus even more relevant – have the early adopters kept their progressive attitude intact also in the so-called 2.0 era of web design and practice?

Specifically, then, what is presented here are a series of analyses detailing the development of social media use by parties and citizens during the 2010 and 2014 Swedish elections. The focus on parties rather than individual politicians is motivated by the fact that Sweden features a political system largely centered on parties – another

potentially interesting comparative aspect to some of the other countries included in the panel application to which this paper belong. The subsequent sections provide brief outlines of the findings to be presented at the conference.

### **The 2010 and 2014 Swedish elections on Twitter**

The employment of Twitter hashtags – thematic keywords indicating tweets with similar content – has become an established practice for users to participate in tweeting on a specific theme. Such practices have become common also in the Swedish political context, where we analyze tweets sent during a month-long period before each studied election, including the most prolific hashtags for each of the two events (2010: N= 99 832; 2014: N=248 091). The featured approach builds on the study of several recent election campaigns in Scandinavia (e.g. Larsson and Moe, 2012; 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 stable of political campaigning by 2014, with more established patterns of use, more mature – more everyday like, maybe even mundane – for politicians and their campaigners, for activists, as well as for politically inclined citizens. While the volume of tweets and users did indeed increase between elections, the types of users who gain the most traction in the hashtagged traffic studied largely remain the same – mostly journalists, politicians, party accounts and other already established societal actors. Moreover, while the 2010 period saw mostly undirected tweets being sent (60.2 %), the 2014 election saw retweets as the most common type (59.6 %). As such, while we are seeing mostly similar user groups engaging to larger extent across elections, this engagement appears to have taken more redistributive tendencies as retweets rise in popularity – mostly strengthening the positions of those already holding roles in civil society.

### **The 2010 and 2014 Swedish elections on Facebook**

While it has been suggested that the uses of Twitter at the hands of politicians have received relatively little scholarly attention (Bekafigo and McBride, 2013), even less work has arguably been performed looking into the uses of the often more popular Facebook platform (Bruns, 2011). Adopting conceptual notions of *permanent campaigning*, suggesting intensive communicative efforts by political actors also outside of election seasons (Elmer, Langlois, and McKelvey, 2012; Larsson, 2014), the Facebook portion of the suggested presentation is focused on providing overarching insights into uses of the platform at hand by Swedish political parties during and inbetween the two elections. Specifically, we distinguish between the activities undertaken by incumbent and challenger parties, where the latter group have often been pointed to as having especially valid reasons to partake online in this regard (e.g. Strandberg, 2013). The study also takes citizens into account, by assessing the types of feedback received. For this purpose, we differentiate between so-called ‘likes’, ‘shares’ and ‘comments’. The main findings indicate that while less established actors show tendencies towards a more permanent employment of Facebook, their established competitors are generally more successful in gaining leverage on the platform. Throughout the studied periods, the right-wing populist Sweden Democrat party emerge as particularly popular – mirroring findings from other contexts (e.g. Jackson and Lilleker, 2009). In comparison with Twitter, then, this particular party does not enjoy

such popularity on the former of these platforms – a result that suggests rather different user groups populate the services studied.

By comparing usage and tendencies across platforms, user groups and elections, the current presentation will provide useful insights into the applications of social media in a unique context. Indeed, rather few cross-platform studies have been provided previously. In sum, then, results suggest that while Twitter appears almost as an “echo-chamber” for societal elites, the analyzed Facebook data tell a somewhat different story given the popularity of the Sweden Democrats. While it would be an overstatement to suggest dramatic differences across the platforms in this regard, the Swedish context features clear examples of differing user groups being activated in relation to political party accounts – with certain implications for political discourse.

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## **Paper II: Social Media in Selected Australian Federal and State Election Campaigns, 2010-15**

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Campaigning in Australian election campaigns at local, state, and federal levels is fundamentally affected by the fact that voting is compulsory in Australia, with citizens who are found to have failed to cast their vote subject to fines. This means that - contrary to the situation in most other nations - elections are decided not by which candidate or party has managed to encourage the largest number of nominal supporters to make the effort to cast their vote, but by some 10-20% of genuine 'swinging voters' who change their party preferences from one election to the next. Political campaigning is thus aimed less at existing party supporters (so-called 'rusted on' voters whose continued support for the party is essentially taken for granted) than at this genuinely undecided middle of the electorate.

Over the past decades, this has resulted in a comparatively timid, vague campaigning style from both major party blocs (the progressive Australian Labor Party [ALP] and the conservative Coalition of the Liberal and National Parties [L/NP]). Election commitments that run the risk of being seen as too partisan and ideological are avoided as they could scare away swinging voters, and recent elections have been fought as much (or more) on the basis of party leaders' perceived personas as they have on stated policies, even though Australia uses a parliamentary system in which the Prime Minister and state Premiers are elected by their party room rather than directly by voters. At the same time, this perceived lack of distinctiveness in policies between the major parties has also enabled the emergence of new, smaller parties which (under Australia's Westminster-derived political system) have no hope of gaining a parliamentary majority but could, in a close election, come to hold the balance of power and thus exert disproportionate influence on a government which relies on their support.

Social media have emerged as political campaigning tools in Australia since YouTube was first used by the major parties, with varying success, to disseminate campaign statements during the 2007 federal election campaign (see Flew, 2008), with blogs also adopted (Kimber, 2012). The leading contemporary platforms, Facebook and Twitter (respectively with some 13m and 2.8m Australian accounts, in a population of 23m Australians), have featured in federal and state campaigns since 2010 (see, for example, Jericho, 2012; Chen, 2015; Young, 2011). Over time, a number of strategies for using such platforms have emerged, and distinctions in the strategies adopted can be discerned based on a number of factors, including for example the technological affordances and social network structures of specific platforms; the overall electoral standing of parties; the projected personas of party leaders; the social media affinity of

parties and candidates; and the positioning of individual candidates as prominent party leaders or comparatively unknown politicians from the parliamentary backbenches.

This paper presents evidence from a longitudinal study of Twitter use by political parties and candidates especially during the 2010 and 2013 federal and 2012 and 2015 Queensland state election campaigns, with additional data drawn from the 2013 Western Australia state campaign. We focus on Twitter both because of its more public and more real-time nature, and because of the significant technical and ethical issues associated with extracting comparable data from Facebook (where politicians' pages are still operated at least in part as personal profiles rather than public pages, and where data gathering would thus be severely affected by the Facebook networks of the researcher gathering the data) - but also because Twitter has by now become a very central space for public political communication in Australia: well over half of all federal and Queensland state parliamentarians now operate Twitter accounts, as did an even greater majority of major and minor party candidates during recent elections.

During the 2013 federal and 2015 Queensland campaigns, we captured all tweets from and @mentions of all of the candidates' known Twitter accounts (442 accounts for the federal election, 158 accounts in Queensland), as well as the prominent hashtags #ausvotes and #qldvotes, providing an exceptionally detailed perspective of party and candidate activities and their resonance with the wider public. We compare this perspective with the respective previous campaigns in 2010 and 2012, where we tracked a smaller sample of accounts (focussing on party leaders and other prominent politicians) as well as the #ausvotes and #qldvotes hashtags, and the 2013 Western Australian election (for candidate accounts and #wavotes alike). Although these earlier datasets are necessarily more limited, and cannot retrospectively be extended to encompass a scope similar to the more recent election datasets (due to the well-documented limitations of retrieving historical Twitter data), they nonetheless serve as highly valuable points of comparison to these recent elections: the aim of our research is not to merely explore the quantitative differences between each set of elections, but instead to address the more important qualitative differences between the social media campaigning approaches adopted especially by the major parties from one election to the next.

To do so, we employ a multi-method approach that connects the quantitative evaluation of the patterns that emerge from our analysis of the Twitter datasets themselves with a close reading of the contemporary media coverage of the political context in general and of the mainstream and social media campaigns in particular. This enables us not only to document what campaigning strategies the parties and candidates employed in each case, but also to infer why they made these specific choices; from election to election, we are also able to test whether in similar circumstances, parties make similar campaigning choices.

For example, preliminary analysis of the social media data on the 2015 Queensland election (held on 31 Jan. 2015) shows exceptionally strong activity by and public engagement with the backbench candidates fielded by Labor - which had suffered a historic defeat in the 2012 election (where it was reduced to only seven MPs in an 89-member parliament), but which in 2015 won 44 seats and was able to return to government with the support of an independent MP. We observed similarly strong

engagement with Labor backbenchers during the 2010 and 2013 federal campaigns, both of which saw Labor lose seats and eventually (in 2013) also lose government. It appears even from this very preliminary analysis that Labor has gradually realised the value of strong social media campaigning by backbenchers in their local electorates - if not to retain or win government, then at least to limit the size of its defeat.

By contrast, the 2015 Queensland L/NP campaign on Twitter was very restrained, with few tweets by front- and backbenchers alike and thus also much more limited public engagement by ordinary Twitter users. This is markedly different from the L/NP's 2013 federal campaign, which saw much more forceful activity from the party's leadership team, yet also very little independent activity from backbenchers, who mainly only retweeted key party messages. This points to a more economical campaigning approach which focusses only on winnable contests and promotes closely stage-managed party content only where such material is likely to be met with a sympathetic response; this would explain why the party adopted a more active Twitter stance during the ultimately successful 2013 federal campaign, while it went to ground rather than expose its Twitter accounts to public criticism during the unsuccessful 2015 Queensland state election.

It should be noted that such explanations are necessarily tentative at this stage; as only one month has passed since the Queensland election date we have not yet been able to process the full dataset in comprehensive detail, and to compare our findings with those from previous elections. Such work will continue over the coming months, and more detailed findings and interpretations will be presented in the final paper.

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## Paper III:

### **How It Begins Is Not How It Ends: U.S. Gubernatorial Campaign Messaging on Social Media Over Time**

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Research on political campaigns in the United States has identified four major stages of political campaigns: the surfacing stage, the primary stage, nominating conventions, and the general election (Trent, Friedenber, & Denton, 2011). However, these stages do not reflect the more nuanced communicative strategies that campaigns deploy at these stages, and especially the changes in campaign dynamics that occur during the general election, as campaigns move from the early part of the general election campaign, through the debate period, and into the final days before and during voting.

Prior research suggests that campaigns have turned to social media to engage in a variety of different messaging strategies, from strategic messaging about policy and attack on opponents, image construction of the candidate, get-out-the vote and mobilization requests, fundraising appeals, and information sharing about the campaign (Gainous & Wagner, 2014). Our qualitative observations of 79 candidates who ran for governor in 36 states across the United States suggest that there are distinct messaging phases that campaigns deploy via social media that reflect and react to the exigencies and the external forces that are dictated by the temporal aspects of election season, which in turn shape campaign messaging.

Prior research also suggests that although at one time Republicans at the presidential level engaged in greater innovation and openness to use new digital communication technologies in 1996 and 2000, by 2004 Democrats had surpassed and continued to be more likely to innovate (Kriess, 2012; Stromer-Galley, 2014). Moreover, research on the elections in 2006 and 2008 (Williams & Gulati, 2013) as well as scholarship on prior presidential elections (Stromer-Galley, 2014) also suggests that challengers are more likely to innovate using digital communication technologies. This study examines whether Democrats and challengers continued to be more innovative--innovation for us operationalized as using social media for a variety of distinct strategic messaging types over the course of the general election cycle. We also ask whether there are differences in the types of message strategies between Twitter and Facebook over the course of the general election campaign.

Using an open source toolkit (Hemsley, Ceskavich, Tanupabrungsun, 2014), we collected the Facebook and Twitter messages produced by the campaign and candidate



accounts of 79 viable candidates who ran for governor. This included all of the Republican and Democratic general election candidates as well as five third-party candidates who received at least 5% of support in credible public opinion polls. The collections started September 15th when all states had completed their primaries and shifted into the general election phase, and continued through November 7th, three days after the election. The final corpus consists of approximately 500,000 tweets and 300,000 Facebook messages collected over eight weeks.

We systematically content analyzed a sample of messages on each platform. We pulled a random sample of 30% of messages on Twitter and on Facebook for each week (7 days) of the general election, starting September 15th. We developed a codebook, and trained six coders to identify the categories, which included coding for: attack, advocacy, and contrastive strategic messaging, and further identifying if these were on the image of the candidate or on issues and policies; calls to action, including digital engagement, traditional engagement, watching media appearances and debates, and voting; informative messages, including campaign events, information on polling places, registering, or voting, and sharing informational materials from the campaign, or commentaries or news pieces from other sources; conversational messages, which are direct messages to supporters in response to a message they received; and ceremonial messages that honored religious holidays or particular groups or celebrated voting or discussed the outcomes of the election. After coders were trained, intercoder agreement was assessed on a 10% sample of Twitter and of Facebook messages, and intercoder agreement levels met or exceeded .75 using Krippendorff's alpha.

Although we have not finished analysis yet, preliminary observations suggests that there are distinct messaging phases of the general election, with candidates in the early phases discussing more of their policies and images, and in the last days of the campaign focusing heavily on messages encouraging people to vote and reminding them about where to get voting information. In the weeks in October, some campaigns are more likely to shift into attack mode, and most campaigns encourage supporters to attend campaign events, read news articles about the campaign, watch the candidates during debates, and generally get involved and get their friends involved.

One surprising finding is that we do not see much use of social media for campaign fundraising efforts. If this finding bears out in the more complete analysis of this data, it would suggest that unlike in the campaign of 2004 when candidates, such as Howard Dean, used his message board to engage in heavy fundraising (Stromer-Galley & Baker, 2006), campaigns are not using social media for heavy fundraising.

We expect these results to help give a more complete understanding of the ways that campaigns are using social media for campaigning, recognizing the temporal nature of campaigns that are reacting to the stage or phase of the campaign they are in during the general election. We will also connect our findings with prior scholarship on U.S. political campaigns to draw some larger conclusions about the stages of campaigning in the United States and what is changing and what is staying the same in the ways campaigns are using social media.

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#### **Paper IV:**

#### **Political use of social media in Italy - A longitudinal perspective**

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Despite the political use of social media received an unprecedented amount of scholarly attention during 2013 general elections (Vaccari 2013, Vaccari & Valeriani 2013, Ceron et al. 2013, Iannelli & Giglietto 2013) it would be wrong to assume that social media represent a novelty in the Italian political landscape. In this paper we will frame social media within a longitudinal perspective that goes from blogs to Twitter, in the context of Italian political communication. Data are framed within the national context of Internet adoption and attitudes towards political participation. In other terms social media are not intended as intended isolated but are described as part of the larger media arena where citizens can acquire political knowledge and participate in the political process at various scale (Norris 2000, Vaccari 2013).

#### **The Italian case**

The adoption of Internet technologies in Italy is extremely diversified. While TV is still considered the main source of news (Vaccari 2013), online sources show a steady increment and are perceived as “important” by 60% of the population surpassing radio and newspapers (News Italia 2014). Overall, Internet use is still low: 62% of the whole

population – among the lowest in Europe - with little diffusion of social network sites (36%) and social media (29%) (Vaccari 2013). Despite those figures, a PEW research from 2012 reported that 36% of Italian social media users, the second highest percentage among western democracies, are engaged in political discussion.

The opportunities of political participation offered by social media appear to be central in a context where the ties between media and politics have been extremely pervasive and have generated a high level of media partisanship (Vaccari 2013). This exasperated media environment, together with a long wave of scandals and economic crisis, caused a soaring distrust toward parties and politicians (Vaccari 2013).

### **Blogs, Facebook and Twitter between political communication and participation**

Within the described scenario, social media have been used, from a political perspective, both as a way for politicians to have a direct communication channel with potential voters - bypassing a partisan mass media system - and as a way for disenchanted citizens to debate political topic outside of the political arenas. Within a longitudinal perspective of social media, from blogs to Facebook and Twitter, these two dimensions seem to coexist instead of being connected to a specific platform.

At the end of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, following the success of Howard Dean's Blog for America (Kerbel & Bloom 2005, Lawson-Borders & Kirk 2005), blogs arrived in Italy as "new thing" for political communication. Besides the presupposed interaction with potential voters, blogs have been largely used as a way for politicians to have a more active role within the definition of media agenda or to overcome the filter represented by traditional mass media (Bentivegna & Russo 2012). While, from a quantitative perspective, the phenomenon has never fully exploded - with just 139 (out of 951) MPs actively blogging in 2012 (Bentivegna & Russo 2012) - there has been at least one case that proved how blogs have been successfully used to set an alternative agenda for political activities. Beppe Grillo, a former comedian and actor, started in 2005 his personal blog where he launched several political campaigns. Due to the general ostracism that Beppe Grillo was suffering from Italian mass media his blog, despite the complete absence of interaction between the comedian and his readership, acted as an alternative communication space characterized by its independence from established media and political power (Rossi & Boccia Artieri 2014). Marked by an intense political agenda, mainly addressed against the established political system, Beppe Grillo's blog acted as initial political platform for the "Five Stars Movement", the brand new party that in 2013 was as the largest party in Italian Chamber of Deputies (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013).

When Facebook and Twitter entered the national political arena - during 2013 general elections - they made visible a wider range of communication strategies ranging from the use of social media as additional channels of communication, to more interactive ways to engage citizens and potential voters. While blogs have had a minor quantitative success, Facebook and Twitter are largely used among Italian politicians with over 200 Facebook pages counting more than 10,000 likes and with every major political leader with an active Twitter account (Vaccari & Valeriani 2013).

The wide adoption of Facebook and Twitter among politicians (and among media

political elites in general) allowed the emergence of new and unprecedented forms of political communication. Moving beyond a simple opposition between social media used to have direct access to voters and social media used by citizens to debate political issues, contemporary use of Facebook and Twitter shows how social media have become fully integrated with the larger media ecosystem where journalists, politicians and citizens are actively engaged. Facebook pages against or supporting a specific political issue as well as Twitter-hashtag launched to debate specific political topic or to protest against an incoming law are just two examples of how contemporary social media allow political participation *through* and *in* the media - as recently described by Carpentier, Dahlgren and Pasquali (2013).

The final paper will go through several example of participation through and in the media focusing on the progressive integration of social media within the larger media ecosystem.

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