Tweeting the elections in Belgium. An analysis of social and traditional cross-media patterns.

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Abstract

Mass media have traditionally functioned as an intermediary system between society and political institutions. The rise of social media potentially reconfigures relations between citizens and politicians and challenges traditional media's position. Via the analysis of Twitter traffic during the 2012 local election in Belgium, this study aims to provide insight in the way different actor types (i.e. politicians, citizens and journalists) and different media outlets (i.e. social and traditional media) are embedded in the Twittersphere. We acknowledge the platform serves as an extension, rather than an alternative for the mainstream media, with high-end Twitter users being mostly established (media) figures. Cross-media linkages often include audiovisual media, both social and traditional media. To conclude, pathways for future research are outlined.

Keywords

Twitter; cross-media; mass media

Introduction

The complexity and intertextuality of the media manifold complicates the role of media studies, compared to the fairly closed media system of the nineteenth century. Without too optimistic expectations, we acknowledge an emerging 'network' sphere of journalistic practice (Heinrich, 2011), driven by this digital media environment and socio-economic contingencies, characterized by a decentralization and non-linearity of news flows. In similar vein, the concept of post-broadcast democracy (Prior, 2006), referring to a constellation of mobile, interactive publics that use mass media content as raw material to play with and perform upon via multiple channels and platforms. As people's engagement with political content gets more fragmented, this possibly affects the strategies of political actors, media organizations, the course of elections and engagement with one's political life in general (Wilson, 2011). Although the internet has not undermined leading news organizations (Curran, Fenton, & Freedman, 2012), social media platforms, such as Twitter, deal with and distribute (mass media) content in varying and often innovative ways. The flows of communication, and related, the flows of influence, are multi-directional and create an 'ambient' news environment (Hermida, 2010). Consequently, the public, media and political agenda are more complexly related to one another.

This study aims to provide insight in the way different actor types (i.e. politicians, citizens and journalists) and different media outlets (i.e. social and traditional media) are embedded in the Twittersphere. Data collection focuses around the local elections in Belgium, held on 14 October 2012. The upsurge in Twitter traffic and mass media coverage provides an interesting opportunity to investigate how multiple media and actors are related to one another.

Methodology

Via the use of the Twitter streaming API, we collected a corpus of 44.610 tweets, between 3 and 21 October 2012, with the 14th of October as election day. Selection of the messages was based on the official hashtag related to the local elections in the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium (i.e. '#vk2012'). The 44.610 Twitter messages correspond to 12.655 users who were participating in the debate on the local elections. The adoption of Twitter by the Dutch-speaking community in Belgium lags behind

other social network sites. Twitter follows fourth in line with 14%, after Facebook (59%), YouTube (26%) and Netlog (17%). Twitter usage is on the rise though, with a 6.5% increase compared to 2010 (iMinds-iLab.o, 2011).

Data collection was performed using the YourTwapperKeeper application, an open source software suite that allows harvesting and archiving of tweets, here according to the 'vk2012' hashtag. The downloadable CVS-files were used for more advanced analyses using Excel, SPSS and the open source visualization tool, Gephi.

Main findings

Twitter traffic before, on and after election day

Based on the analysis of Twitter traffic on a daily base, we are able to provide a chronological overview of activity during the election period. From the 3th of September up until one week before election day (14 October 2012), daily Twitter traffic does not exceed 200 messages a day. Two peaks were found during that period, i.e. the publication of the list numbers in the Flemish mainstream media and election day in the Netherlands. The week before election day, we notice a steady rise in Twitter traffic as well as an increase in mass media coverage, more specifically audiovisual reporting on the elections. The 14th of October, a peak in user activity is found, which far exceeds Twitter messages sent before and after election day. Overall, this is a returning pattern, also found by other research on Twitter activity during election period, e.g. in Sweden (Larsson & Moe, 2011) and in Australia (Bruns & Burgess, 2011).

The most active and most visible actors in the Twittersphere

The identification of the most active users in the debate further allows us to define the position of and relation between journalists, citizens and politicians. When we elaborate on the ten most active users in the debate (in terms of singleton messages, i.e. no retweets), we notice the prominence of established media organizations and political actors. One national and two regional traditional media outlets were amongst the most active contributors, often including hyperlinks in their messages with reference to the website. Concerning political parties, both right wing (Flemish nationalists) and left wing politicians are represented.

Based on the visualization software *Gephi*, interaction patterns between political parties/politicians, media/journalists and citizens can be demarcated. Top users can be defined in terms of *Indegree* (@replies received) or addressivity by multiple users. On the other hand, *Outdegree* (@replies sent), refers to the expressivity towards multiple users. The actors receiving a lot of messages differ from the actors sending a lot of messages. The top ten receivers are all established or elite actors (i.e. politicians and media actors), whereas the top senders are primarily citizen-users. Hence, we acknowledge a one-directional communication flow, from non-established to established actors. Two-way communication between different actor types is rare and inter-party communication is rather absent as well.

Cross-media connectivity: Hyperlinks and hashtags

Twitter potentially fulfills a gatewatching function (Bruns, 2005), through the sharing, linking or highlighting of particular stories via hyperlinks or hashtags. In our sample of 44.610 Twitter messages, about 20% or 9201 URL's were found (referring to 6950 unique URL's). Categorization of the most frequent hyperlinks shows most hyperlinks refer to social media ($N=$ 3774), although traditional outlets are well represented as well ($N=$ 3112). Concerning social media, we notice audiovisual material (e.g. YouTube and Twitpic) far exceeds more textual sources (e.g. blogs). References to traditional outlets contain fairly equal amounts of audiovisual and print outlets. Concerning audiovisual material, the public service broadcaster VRT holds the dominant position and for print media, it's the quality newspaper titles that are most represented.

In addition to hashtags referring to politicians or political parties (*N*= 2763) and municipalities (*N*= 2513), we found a moderate amount of hashtags related to traditional media outlets (*N*= 902). Here, audiovisual material far outnumbers references to newspapers, which relates to the spikes in Twitter traffic we found during particular televised events or debates. Again, the public service broadcaster VRT and its news and current affairs programs in particular, are often referred to.

Discussion

This study takes into account multiple Twitter conventions (@replies, hyperlinks and hashtags) to understand the characteristics of the Twitter election debate and contributes to the existing literature on Twitter usage in an election context. Traditional media outlets embrace Twitter as a means to extend their reach beyond traditional content platforms. For politicians, it provides an extra or alternative information channel towards citizen-voters and bypass the mass media to push their agenda to the public. The content of the messages as well as a time aspect should enable to grasp agenda-setting influences.

The demarcation of the three different actor types shows that communication flows in a one-directional manner. The prophecy of an open and decentralized sphere is somewhat countered by the high visibility of (i.e. addressivity towards) established actors and high activity of non-established actors towards these established actors. To conclude, we emphasize to focus on Twitter's role within the broader media ecology, with particularly strong connections with audiovisual content of traditional as well as social media outlets.

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