

Twitter politics – democracy, representation and equality in the new online public spheres of politics

Abstract

Introduction

During the era of strong party politics, the central arenas for hard news journalism in Finland were the *Finnish Broadcasting Company* (Yleisradio), newspapers such as *Helsingin Sanomat* and *Aamulehti* and party newspapers. In recent times, however, web versions of newspapers and television channels as well as politicians' blogs have widened the scope of political public spheres. Twitter updates, consisting of a maximum of 140 characters, epitomise this change, with seizing the moment, reflection on the actions of oneself and others as well as quick reactions to various current issues being some of the key characteristics of Twitter updates. According to previous studies, Twitter is further defined by a strong emphasis on the person sending the message – whether they are a politician or a journalist, the message gets personified. Even though many institutions already use Twitter in their public communications, the way politicians and journalists communicate on Twitter is generally more personal and tends to create new networks. Communication on Twitter is characterised by certain fast-paced here-and-now effects as well as impressions of the actions of oneself and others.

The questions on how politics affects media and, on the other hand, how media affects politics have been a central topic in research conducted in the fields of both communications and political science. Generally, the perspective has been institutional, with emphasis on the change in the operational models in politics and journalism. However, Twitter enables politicians and journalists to stop following the institutional logics, agenda setting or ways of hunting for news that the institutions they represent follow. They are, of course, conscious of their public role in their daily communications but, at the same time, they constantly negotiate the boundaries between their public and private roles. Twitter can be understood as a moulding force that continuously moulds these roles as well as political communication. As such, Twitter cannot be studied without considering more traditional media. Just as we cannot know all effects of traditional media without empirical research, we cannot but guess how important Twitter is in political communication. The effects and meanings of media are always context-dependent as well as socially and culturally mediated. For this reason, the context of the study matters.

Research on the social networks between Finnish politicians and political journalists, unique even on the international level, is an attempt to reflect on how an online public sphere such as Twitter moulds the public sphere of politics and the way we understand politics for its part. The Twitter politics project has a particular focus on who communicates, who follows whom and what kinds of meanings concerning politics are created in Twitter. First and foremost, the project attempts to shed light on how this new online public sphere of politics has the potential to rework our perception of democracy, representation and equality.

Material, methods and central findings of the study

The project consists of two related empirical studies. One of the studies delves into the networks between the Finnish political elite, such as ministers and party leaders, and (political) journalists.

The material for the network analysis was gathered as a data sample in the end of 2013, and then complemented by material gathered in connection with the elections to the European Parliament (2014). Politicians included in the material comprise of people who represent the political elite, including ministers, party leaders, chairs of parliamentary groups, speakers of the parliament and chairs of the committees (34 people, N=34), whereas the journalists in the material were political journalists who had created a Twitter account for themselves (39 people, N=39). The studied variables were parties (for politicians), media affiliation (for journalists), geographical location and gender, among others. The other empirical study, on the other hand, focused on Tweets that the candidates for the European Parliament mailed before the elections. This material consisted of 37.000 messages sent by the candidates during a period of two months before the elections. Two lists were created based on the candidates that had the most activity on Twitter: the top 20 users and the top 20 receivers. Basic personal details were collected from these individuals – these included their age, gender, party, position, and a place of residence. Compiling two lists and comparing them to each other enabled canvassing who use Twitter in their election campaigns, what they use it for and what kind of feedback they receive. Above all else, the comparison shed light on whether Twitter usage could level the candidates' differences in resources or whether it merely sustains their differences in resources.

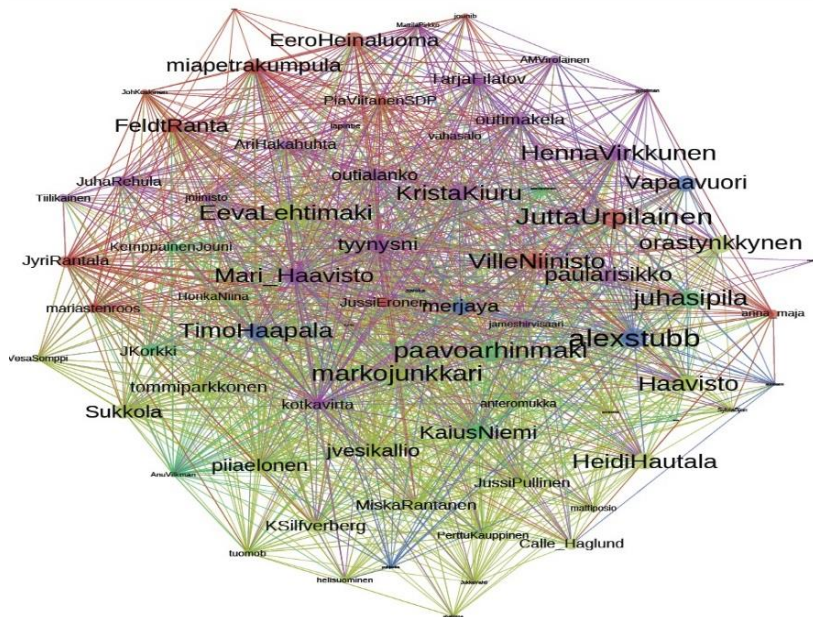
In order to observe the role of Twitter as a means of political communication, the project utilises methods from communication studies, political science and data analysis, namely data mining and network analysis. Network analysis is a method that enables research into social relations between actors, regularities that form on the basis of these relations and the amount of interaction. Conducting social network analysis is always a challenge because the method evolves during research. Network analysis can be thought of being situated between qualitative and quantitative research, and the results it produces require interpretation as well as constant reevaluation and questioning of the results as the research progresses. The method can be understood as a series of steps, each of which defines the study in its own way, excluding certain options and opening up others.

A particular point of interest in the project has been the public sphere formed in Twitter as a stage for representational democracy and equality. Central questions guiding the research have focused on the networks between the political elite and political journalists, changes in political culture and new forms of political communication. The results shall be published in three international and one Finnish-language article. Additionally, the network analysis used in the project shall be evaluated in a separate Finnish-language publication.

The results in brief are as follows:

- (1) A so called Twitter elite (see an example of visualisation below) emerges from the material that focused on the networks of politicians and journalists. Its participants interact actively and are followed by a large amount of people. The elite forms a fixed, clique-like network. The politicians that belong to this group are not necessarily in important institutional positions in day-to-day politics – although some of them have previously held significant political positions. Therefore, institutional status does not directly explain Twitter fame. Based on the material, Twitter politics is centred around the capital city and represents the popular parties in Helsinki, such as the National Coalition Party and the Green League. Political journalism in Twitter, for its part, seems to focus on the “mythic centre of media power”, *Helsingin Sanomat*, *MTV3* and the *Finnish Broadcasting Company*. Furthermore, the networks between politicians and journalists were occasionally observed to reveal certain aspects of the actors' values that cannot be deduced by studying the content of their

messages. Belonging to a certain network may, in some cases, be a more important indicator of Twitter as a platform for political communication than the actual content of the messages.



(2) The study on the candidates for the European Parliament indicates that Twitter is a medium for the election campaigns of middle-aged people in good positions who are members of the Green League or the National Coalition Party and who live in large cities in Southern Finland. Twitter was mostly used by those who already have established political career in politics. Somewhat surprisingly, female candidates used Twitter significantly more than could be expected considering the percentage of women in all candidates. When examining the answers candidates received on Twitter, the study revealed an emphasis on middle-aged men from large Finnish cities who are in good positions. Moreover, it would seem that the candidates used Twitter to compensate weaknesses related to their party's organisation and to reach voters in areas they themselves had the strongest support in. Generally, Twitter and social media supplement other public spheres and complement the election campaign instead of replacing other public spheres. Twitter in itself does not raise new and unknown candidates to the fore. Instead, it is a medium whose usage in elections correlates to other resources. Candidates with significant resources available to them for campaigning were also the ones to use Twitter the most. The conclusion of the study, therefore, is that Twitter maintains already existent power hierarchies rather than offers an effective medium for challenging and questioning them.

Conclusions

Since the group studied in our network analysis comprised of members of the elite, it is natural to examine the results in the light of elite studies, as well. In elite studies, the central research questions are related to the vertical and horizontal mobility of the elite, thought to be one of the indicators of democracy and equality in society. Vertical mobility portrays the elite group's openness to members of groups that are a minority within the elite, such as women or various minorities (e.g. immigrants). Horizontal mobility, on the other hand, refers to the relations between different elite groups. The composition of the Twitter elite demonstrates this ambivalence in online public spheres: on the one hand, it enables, in principle, open access to

power networks, while on the other hand, the structure and characteristics of the networks between politicians and journalists reveal hierarchical and fairly clearly defined communities and, therefore, more or less closed elite groups and clusters within them.

A parallel can be drawn from the findings of our network analysis to the Finnish elite groups Ilkka Ruostetsaari charted in his book *Vallan sisäpiirissä* (Inner Circles of Power, 2014). He discovered that the National Coalition Party and the Green League were overrepresented in the power elite, residing mostly in Southern Finland, while exactly half of the members of the mass communication elite supports the National Coalition Party. Moreover, his study revealed that the percentage of women in the entire political elite is 43%, whereas the respective proportion in the mass communication elite is 33%. In the Twitter elite we studied, however, men and women were equally represented. Based on our findings, the interaction between the political elite and the elite formed by political journalists was relatively frequent, even though both politicians and journalists formed also their own inclusive networks, too. It would appear that Twitter is a new forum for communication between elites. However, it also represents a new type of online public sphere, one where even communication between elites is public.

Different strategies for Twitter usage can be observed from the data. Some of the politicians networked extensively outside the political elite, whereas some of the popular politicians in our sample networked solely within the political elite. Twitter as a service is based on the principle of the rich getting richer: popular users tend to get even more followers. Based on this principle, the most popular Twitter users in the spheres of politics and media could be seen as a kind of “elite of the elites”. In this respect, our study does not support the proposed ideas of social media as a democratising force. Instead, it supports the view of an intersection of media and politics where existent power structures get stronger and more apparent. The most popular journalists on Twitter represent the largest media houses in the Finnish capital region, while the politicians who have gathered the largest following and who use Twitter most naturally are members of the biggest parties in the capital region, the National Coalition Party and the Green League.

The new online public spheres of politics are used not only to build election campaigns and networks but also to negotiate various dimensions of democracy, equality and political representation. Twitter acts as a moulding force for the public sphere of politics, and its role in the public discourse necessary for democracy depends on the actors on stage as well as their relations and networks. Interaction enabled by new communications technology does not necessarily offer anything new if established social networks merely move from traditional arenas onto a new arena. However, it could also remodel these networks by giving space and opportunity to new kinds of actors and novel forms of communication. Twitter as a media is not an independent field of political communication; it is also used to share links to the websites of newspapers, for example. Twitter in itself cannot be viewed as a gendered medium either. Variables in the studied material concerning elections to the European Parliament, such as gender, generation, social class, geographical location and political party can be explained by the elite structure of the Finnish capital region and by the general nature of the elections to the European Parliament.

As a stage for the public sphere of politics, social media heralds a new phase in representational democracy, called media democracy or audience democracy. Besides the so called mediatization of politics, it is also characterised by novel views on political representation and leadership. Audience democracy is defined by the dominant role of media in forming opinions as well as political representation and leadership that are both personified and based on the public image. At least in Finland, this change is related to an enhanced hype and visibility of (young) women in

politics, exemplified by the studies of Heikki Paloheimo (2007) and Mari K. Niemi (2014). Social media is a fitting tool in this model of democracy, dubbed the politics of closeness by Pierre Rosanvallon (2008), that requires constant empathetic presence in the media from politicians and where political communication has been emotionalised. At the same time, the perception of political representation has changed: it is now viewed more as the articulation of affects than the representation of interests and identities.

For its part, the frequent communication between politicians and journalists in Twitter helps to build emotional politics that create feelings of closeness and presence. Politicians need to navigate between two worlds. Their work includes participation in political decision-making that is becoming ever more complicated and reacting to unforeseeable political events and questions at the same time as they need to be ever-present and to empathetically listen to the citizens' worries. This change in political representation may have even improved the positions of female politicians because of the cultural perception of women as more empathetic and socially adept problem-solvers than men, especially with regard to the day-to-day worries of people. This kind of expertise is a form of marketable knowhow when politicians and journalists negotiate the contents of the political agenda in the online public spheres of politics. Furthermore, a forum such as Twitter offers politicians the opportunity to take on multiple roles, comment on current issues while simultaneously feeding possible topics for journalists, demonstrate empathy towards the public's worries and shed light on their personal side.

To journalists, the continuous presence of politicians in the media may be both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, it provides material for news stories, on the other, choosing the right story becomes more difficult with an abundance of possibilities. Searching for a newsworthy story is easier through structured Twitter networks where journalists learn to recognise the media strategies of different politicians and to distinguish newsworthy deviations from the constant information flow of the politics of closeness. For democracy, our results are, therefore, both positive and negative. The communication within the Twitter elite is public and, thus, transparent but, at the same time, political actors, in particular, are aware of being featured and utilise Twitter to increase their visibility in the media and to enhance their public image in ways that changing political situations demand. Additionally, the fixed and fairly closed communities and clusters of the Twitter elite indicate that power appears to concentrate towards the inner circles of both political and mass communication elites, even within the context of the politics of closeness.

The project has been carried out in a multidisciplinary working group that included: Professor Iiris Ruoho, PhD (project coordinator; Electronic Media, School of Communication, Media and Theatre, University of Tampere), University Lecturer Jaana Kuusipalo, DSocSc (Gender Studies, School of Social Sciences and Humanities, University of Tampere), Senior Researcher Erkkä Railo, DSocSc (Centre for Parliamentary Studies, University of Turku), Professor Erkki Karvonen, PhD (Information and Communication Studies, University of Oulu), Researcher Jiri Nieminen, DPolSc (Politics, COMET, University of Tampere), Researcher Eliisa Vainikka, MA (Social Media, COMET, University of Tampere) and Researcher Jukka Huhtamäki, MSc Techn (Data Analysis, Intelligent Information Systems Laboratory, Tampere University of Technology).