

INTRODUCTION

Re/Constructing Politics through Social & Online Media: Discourses, Ideologies, and Mediated Political Practices

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Abstract

In recent years, the connection between online and social media and politics has become one of the central ones in contemporary societies and has been explored very widely in political research and media and communication studies. Against such growing body of research, this Special Issue foregrounds the role of language as a key carrier of political ideologies and practices on social and online media. It aims to advance the scholarly understanding of contemporary political and democratic dynamics by postulating the need for a broader, problem-driven look at how political practices and ideologies are articulated on social and online media. It illustrates the value of a cross-disciplinary take that allows overcoming both the classic (e.g. qualitative vs. quantitative) and the more recent (e.g. small vs. big data) divides in explorations of the language of online politics.

Keywords

social media, online politics, language, ideology, empirical analysis, discourse, data, interdisciplinarity

1. Politics, Language, and Online Media

The interest in the in-depth connection between social media and politics goes back to the early 2000s and in particular to Barack Obama's first presidential campaign in 2008, largely supported by the candidate's huge presence on social media networks and especially Twitter (Gainous and Wagner 2014; Katz, Barris and Jain 2013; Parmalee and Bichard 2012). Driven by Obama's evident success in tapping into different audiences by means of Twitter and other social media platforms, many researchers have progressively moved into considering online political communication as increasingly a key modus of communication of contemporary politics and of the wider political action. Researchers began to envision social media as one of the key entry points for looking into contemporary political including politico-organisational practice, and highlighted the role of language that makes up the social media contents as a main carrier for political meanings and ideologies.

As a result, many scholars have put forward arguments on the nascent of 'digital politics' (Vaccari 2013) as well as web-based communication – and eventually social media – becoming central in mediation and mediatisation of political practice (Coleman and Freelon 2015). Indeed, the latter took place even despite the fact that some of the key models of mediatisation of politics have long managed to go largely ignoring the online reality (see e.g. Esser and Strömbäck 2014) or only related the online to 'mass' political behaviour or

patterns of social and political mobilisation (Bennet and Segeberg 2011). However, at the same time, many researchers have also advocated the rise of alternative publics fostered by 'the political web' (Dahlgren 2013; Dahlgren and Alvares 2013) and argued that the affordances of the web foster the emergence of new forms of engagement beyond the classic realm of politics while often undermining the centrality of the traditional 'offline' political process. Scholars have also seen social media as one of the key potentials, but also dangers, of politics in the context of democracy (Tucker et al. 2017).

In recent years, the connection between social media and politics has been explored very widely. This has taken place by means of scholarship in a variety of disciplines including, most notably, political science and media and communication research. Due to the sheer amount of scholarly work on the topic, the actual limits of the field of research on politics and online media are probably difficult to define at present. However, a few dominant tendencies can be distinguished in the most recent scholarship.

Within the first of them, largely related to the original interests in politics and online media highlighted above, scholars would look at social media as tools of top-down political communication or, as it is most commonly defined in political studies, as a tool of communicating 'elite' politics. This strand of work has by now come to traditionally analyse ways in which social media are used in the contexts of both everyday politics (see e.g. Highfield 2016) but especially in the context of electoral campaigns of various sorts (see e.g. Larsson and Moe 2011; Graham, Jackson and Broersma 2016; Kreiss 2016a & 2016b; Larsson 2015). Studies in this area have also shown how, progressively, politicians and political groups moved from using social media as tools of political communication in electoral campaigns (Rodríguez and Garmendia Madariaga 2016; Nulty 2016) towards creating their sustained and ongoing 'presence' and transforming their political identity in social media (Small 2011; Oelsner and Hemirich 2015; Larsson 2015). However, at the same time, the new political realities created on social media have been shown to be strongly based on elite networks and interactions (esp. between politics and journalism; see e.g. Lasorsa, Lewis and Holton 2012; Verweij 2012; Hedman and Djerf-Pierre 2013; Anderson 2015).

Indeed, it has also been shown quite extensively that online and in particular social media do not necessarily have as positive effect on politics – and indeed the wider society (see esp. Fuchs 2014) – as was originally expected, and often contribute to the solidification of politically elitist behaviour rather than opening politics to the 'masses'. Social media have, accordingly, contributed to the change of not only political but also related media and journalistic practice and have become central in communication between politics and media organizations. Often replacing traditional communication genres (such as e.g. press releases) and redefining the role of journalists (Olausson 2017), social media have also, increasingly, come to have a primary agenda-setting functions for media coverage of politics (Parmalee 2014). Further to the elitism mentioned above, scholars in this trend have also pointed to the problem with – or the actual serious deficiency of – the actual interactivity in political and related use of social media, which, as such, has in most come to be only performed by political actors or used as an element of ideological positioning and control (van Dijck 2013) in an often ongoing mediated 'few-to-many' online spectacle (Berglez 2016). Calhoun (2016) has even argued that the increased spread of such elitist and autopoietic political social media usage has effectively decoupled social media from the actual public-sphere – along with its desired interactivity and deliberation – and has probably been one of the central factors in not only the further celebrification of politics (cf. Donald

Trump) but also the ensuing re-emergence and success of (right-wing) populist politics in Europe and the USA in the second decade of 2000s (see Krzyżanowski 2018a, 2018b; Wodak and Krzyżanowski 2017).

On the other hand, a second strand on research on politics and online as well as social media has looked at how social media can be indicative of various including emergent patterns of political behaviour or of 'mass' political action. Studies in this area examine how in particular the political and electoral preferences and sentiments are built and displayed in social media as used by organised or individual citizens (see esp. Ceron et. al. 2014). Notable research in this area (e.g. Vaccari et. al. 2015) shows that expression of political views on social media has become a truly mass phenomenon. However, scholars working in this trend have also argued that as debates on social and political issues unfold they can lead to increased polarisation of views (Yardi and Boyd 2010, Lee et. al. 2014). In a similar vein, research has shown that online media, including as used on the mobile and social media platforms, often progressively tests accepted norms in political communication and facilitates an increase in uncivil political expressions or to the growth of uncivil behaviour (see esp. Krzyżanowski and Ledin 2017). This has been argued both as far as voters (supporters/opponents) and politicians were concerned but also while looking at individual incivility in social media interactions between various members of the public (Groshek and Cutino 2016).

Finally, and to some extent building on the previous area, a very sizeable strand of research has looked at the social media as tools of bottom-up political engagement and participation (see, inter alia, Gerbaudo 2012). Within this area, many studies have focussed on how social media are central in fostering contemporary modes of grassroots and other forms of political mobilisation (Metzger and Tucker 2017). Scholars have shown, for example, that social media carry huge potential of supporting political movements, especially in contexts with the otherwise obvious limits of political expression and activity. This came to be originally evidenced in such occurrences as, inter alia, the 2009 Iranian uprising or the ensuing revolutionary wave of Arab Spring in the early 2010s (see e.g. Wolfsfeld, Segev and Sheaffer 2013). But more recent work has also pointed to the centrality of social media in political mobilisation in Western democracies as evidenced by movements such as the 'Occupy' (Martin Rojo 2014) or, more recently, the 'Black Lives Matter' movement in the USA (Freelon, McIlwain and Clark 2016).

Yet, while a very significant body of research in the above trend has been rather optimistic, some scholars have assessed this link critically. For example, research has shown that, as such, contemporary social protests can hardly be imagined beyond the use of social media – and especially online-based self-mediation – and that the emergence of such social media or even 'Twitter revolutions' (Christensen 2011) thus carries a large volume of risks to the contemporary bottom-up political mobilisation. The latter can thus easily be tackled by way of technological measures rather than by opposing political arguments, etc. On the other hand, many voices have also been raised on the challenges of the 'personalisation of politics' (Bennett and Segeberg 2011) afforded by social media and with regard to the transforming modi of collective (as well as 'connective', *ibid.*) political action, often limited to a sheer aggregation of temporarily aligned and relatively unstable, individual political views. Finally, some works have also shown the dangers of online including social media political activism especially when deployed by undemocratic actors such as, in particular, the extreme right (Ekman 2014).

2. Aims and Rationale of the Special Issue

Coming on the heels of such a huge – and indeed constantly growing – body of research on politics and online including social media, this Special Issue investigates that role of language as a core of mediated, contemporary political practice, indeed both within the traditional ‘elite’ (or top-down) and ‘mass’ (or bottom-up) vectors of political dynamics. However, while we treat the classic distinction between ‘elite’ and ‘mass’ politics as a starting point for the explorations in the Special Issue, we also show that, with the emergence and spread of political use of online media, the intersection between those areas becomes one of the key loci of exploring political discourses and practices (see below).

Thus, *we build on the premise that whether within ‘elite’ or ‘mass’ politics, or at the intersection of the former and the latter, the role of language as a carrier of political ideologies and practices remains central.* It hence requires us to build on the key language-related ‘turns’ in interdisciplinary research accelerated by the ascent of the political use online and social media. Accordingly, on the one hand, *we set off from a very peculiar ‘linguistic turn’ in the broad field of political research* – including the traditional political science but also political sociology, democracy studies, electoral studies, analysis of new social movements, international relations, etc. – and argue that social media have recently very effectively put language – whether seen as ‘discourse’ or ‘data’ – at a central point of political analysis. While, to be sure, politics – and especially political communication – research has since the arrival of methods of content analysis paid attention to the ‘contents’ or ‘language’ of political messages, the arrival of online media has not only very significantly deepened that trend but also shown that the political-scientific explorations of, in particular, social media language require new approaches to dealing with the quantity as well as quality of mediated political messages.

On the other hand, looking from the perspective of language and discourse analysis as well as of the wider communication research, *we draw from a vital ‘political’ turn that, spawned by the development of online and social media, very significantly deepened linguistic and discourse-analytic and communication-scientific interest in the increasingly political character of mediated communication,* indeed performed not only within but also increasingly beyond the traditional realm of political practice. We recognise, however, that the new character of communication on online media – including brevity of social media texts, huge quantity and volume of messages, irregularity of language use, etc. – have all posed very significant challenges to many language- and discourse-oriented theories and methodologies.

Well aware of the affordances, as well as the limitations, of the aforementioned ‘turns’, this Special Issue aims to showcase as well as bridge several key tendencies in the existent scholarship on online and social media and politics as well as integrate various theoretical and analytical approaches. On the one hand, contributions to the Special Issue consider approaches to social & online media as bottom-up tools of political participation and democratisation. They showcase in-depth studies of how social media are indicative of changing social-wide political preferences and dynamics of both online and offline political behaviour. On the other hand, articles in the Special Issue show how, perceived in a top-down way, social and online media are used as tools of contemporary governance or highlight their prominent role as top-down instruments of political image and identity building of politicians as public individuals, of political parties, of national and supranational political

institutions or even of the strongly ideologically driven transnational organizations (e.g. ISIS). But several contributions also show that, while social media may provide the opportunity – or a platform – for the dialogue between the top-down and the bottom-up vectors of political dynamics, they remain a contested intersectional space where, while some interaction does take place, it is still far from forging *de facto* linkages between ‘elite’ and ‘mass’ politics.

We hence highlight the value of a broader, problem-driven look at politics in online media and illustrate the value of a cross-disciplinary take that allows overcoming both the classic (e.g. qualitative vs. quantitative) and the more recent (e.g. small vs. big data) divides in explorations of language as a key component and carrier of political practice and trace of elite and mass political dynamics. Therefore, through a number of systematic, empirically-driven contributions, this Special Issue aims to advance a dialogue-driven discussion on the role of online media in politics. It looks at how political practices and ideologies are constructed and articulated in social and online media. We do so with the aim to advance the scholarly understanding of contemporary national and cross-national social, political and democratic dynamics.

Working within, as well as across, the highlighted tendencies in research, contributions to this edited collection can further the debate on considering social and online media as not only passive bystanders or objective tools but indeed as powerful agents of political transformation and change including in the contexts already deemed democratic (e.g. in Western liberal democracies). At the same time, the Special Issue showcases a variety of novel and innovative approaches to online media and political language analysis. It includes research performed within both qualitative and quantitative incl. text-oriented research paradigms and showcase new, interdisciplinary data-driven methodologies in politically-oriented social and online media research.

To this end, this Special Issue brings together leading international experts working on politics, political language, discourse and communication in the context of social & online media. The publication aims to showcase the research field of social and online media in political analysis as strongly interdisciplinary in nature. It therefore gathers academics from across the social sciences incl. communication, media and discourse studies, political science or political sociology and social psychology. It includes researchers working on both national and supranational politics and looking at a variety of ways in which in-depth analyses of ideas and ideologies constructed and articulated in social & online media contribute to the scholarly understanding of contemporary national and cross-national social, political and democratic dynamics.

3. Scope and Contributions to the Special Issue

While showcasing various perspectives as well as diverse theoretical and analytical approaches, the contributions in this Special Issue remain grouped according to the traditional i.e. ‘mass’ vs. ‘elite’ (or bottom-up vs. top-down) approaches to political communication with a sizeable and indeed the largest group of articles located at the intersection of these two strands.

The first set of articles focuses on language and communication in the ‘mass’ political processes. In the first article, Scott Wright analyses the impact of "super-participants" - people who create lots of content, set the agenda, or moderate debates - on everyday online political talk in a non-political online discussion fora, sometimes referred to as "third spaces".

Wright finds that there was extensive evidence of super-participation in the fora, and that they did, in fact, significantly impact the nature of political talk. Through his analyses of online super-participation, Wright demystifies factors and forces that shape and influence online debates and have become among the key issues of contemporary public and political concern. The spread and impact of 'fake news', strategic manipulation, online abuse, and an increasingly polarised online public sphere have all generated significant public concern amid fears that it is denuding the public sphere and citizenship; facilitating the rise of populism; and impacting electoral outcomes.

In the second article of this, Hans-Jörg Trenz, Michael Bossetta and Anamaria Dutceac-Segesten investigate, over an 18-month period surrounding the UK Brexit referendum, the commenting activity of nearly 2 million Facebook users engaging with political news from British media or with the posts of referendum campaigns. The authors ask whether citizens' engagement with political news on Facebook motivates their participation with political campaign posts, and examine whether users commenting on campaign pages trend towards ideologically reinforcing media. Overall, they find comparatively low levels of commenting activity on the official referendum campaigns vis-à-vis the media, and the majority of users (70%) commented only once. Looking at the subset of users commenting on both page types ("cross-posters"), the authors identify a general spill over effect from media to campaign pages, suggesting a positive correlation between political interest and online participation on Facebook. They also show that a reverse spill over occurs immediately around and after the vote, with Remain cross-posters active on the Guardian while Leave cross-posters' media engagement registers more diffuse

Our second set of articles lie at the intersection of traditional 'elite' and 'mass' political communication research. In the first of these, Joanna Sterling and John Jost harness a political psychology perspective to explore how social media become carriers of political ideologies expressed via discourse on moral values within both the wider public and among the political class. The authors analyse Twitter language to explore hypotheses derived from moral foundations theory, which suggests that liberals and conservatives prioritize different values. The authors hence conduct two interrelated bottom-up and top-down empirical studies in which they first examine 11 million tweets from nearly 25,000 U.S. residents and then juxtapose such 'public' Twitter analysis with that of 59,000 tweets from 388 members of the U.S. Congress. The authors show that the public tendencies confirm expectations with liberals expressing fairness concerns more often than conservatives, and with conservatives more likely to express concerns about group loyalty, authority, and purity. However, Sterling and Jost also show that, in their Tweets, political liberals and conservatives in the Congress used largely similar language to emphasize often significantly different policy priorities and ideological positions.

The juxtaposition of 'the public' and 'the political' in the context of online media is also continued, albeit under a different guise, in the following article by Åsa Kroon and Daniel Angus, which explore how web-TV may enforce public challenges to elite political communication. The authors examine the practices of the mediatisation of politics in the web TV environment via a satirical encounter between a self-declared "prankster" posing as a web TV broadcaster and representing the voice of the 'people', and several Swedish politicians. The discussion reflects on various data emanating from this encounter to reveal how Web TV challenges traditional broadcasting norms. It offers fresh challenges for politicians who are continuously adapting to new media logics for exposure, yet often in a way that reproduces old political habits and patterns of mediated behaviour.

Next, Andrea Ceron explores the online behaviour of politicians and their interaction with their 'followers'. The author argues that, so far, little attention has been devoted to the effect of social networking sites (SNS) on 'hard politics' choices. Focusing on two case studies related to Italian politics in 2016, the debate on the Civil Unions bill and on the 'Fertility Day' crisis, Ceron attempts to fill this gap assessing the influence of SNS on the behaviour of politicians. The author conducts a supervised aggregated sentiment analysis and time series analysis to evaluate whether politicians surrender to the pressure put on them by their followers. The findings highlight some positive effects in terms of accountability and transparency, though in terms of responsiveness as such politics online seems to continue as usual.

Finally, in the article closing this section, Alexandra Siegel and Joshua Tucker focus on transnational 'informal' political organizations such as the Islamic State – or ISIS – and ask questions about the logic and success of its online strategy. The authors explore to what extent ISIS achieves its goals of attracting a global audience, broadcasting its military successes, and marketing the Caliphate online, including on social media. Using Twitter and YouTube search data, Siegel and Tucker assess how suspected accounts of ISIS, as well as its sympathizers and opponents, 'behave' across the two social media platforms, thus offering key insights into the successes and limitations of ISIS' information warfare strategy. Analysing the tweet language and metadata from 16,364 suspected ISIS accounts, the authors find that a core network of ISIS Twitter users are producing linguistically diverse narratives, touting battlefield victories and depicting utopian life in the Caliphate. Furthermore, a dataset of over 70 million tweets, as well as analysis of YouTube search data, indicates that although pro-ISIS content and discourse spreads globally and largely remains on message, it is indeed far less prolific than the anti-ISIS content. However, as the authors note, this anti-ISIS content is not necessarily anti-extremist or aligned with Western policy goals.

The final section of the Special Issue – devoted to various guises of 'elite' political communication online – opens up with an article by Michał Krzyżanowski, who explores the role of social media – and in particular Twitter – in the supranational politico-organizational context of the European Union (EU) institutions. Proposing a critical discourse framework for the analysis of the politico-organizational use of Twitter, Krzyżanowski shows that while, to some extent, bringing change or 'modernization' to EU political communication patterns, online media largely sustain some of the deep-seated dispositions in EU communicative and organizational practices as well as political discourses. As deployed by the EU's – and specifically the European Commission's – spokesperson service, social and online media help in solidifying some of the controversial patterns in EU political communication. They also bring in other, more contemporary, challenges as regards using Twitter and social media as parts of political as well as institutional and organizational communication. They also, unfortunately, to large extent fail to deliver any remedy to EU's communication deficit at the time when the Union faces multiple crises (including Brexit) and is in acute need of effectively communicating its politics to the European demos.

In the following article that explores how politicians use online media – more specifically blogs – Martin Karlsson and Joachim Åström argue that as the Internet has come to play a greater role in politics, there has been a growing scholarly interest in how digital and social media are actually changing politics and political practice. The authors point to the competition between the 'innovation' and 'normalization' hypotheses that have been at the centre of debates on politics online and set out to identify evidence of innovation and

normalization in terms of how politicians communicate in the blogosphere with their (potential) voters and what, therefore, is the level of influence they are attaining within the political blogosphere. The analyses conducted by Karlsson and Åström show paradoxical results. For example, those groups of politicians who utilize political communication in the blogosphere in more innovative and progressive ways – thus mirroring the hopes and expectations of how social media might influence politicians and political communication – effectively have weaker positions within the blog network compared to other politicians.

Finally, in the paper that closes the focus on elite-political communication and the use of online media by politicians, Tamara Small explores the use and language of Twitter in the context of Canada. The author provides an empirical account of the amount and condition of negative messages produced on Twitter by Canadian party leaders. Using data that comes from a content analysis of tweets in two elections held in 2011, Small explores both the tone of Twitter communication and the differential use of Twitter by political incumbents and challengers. Despite expectations and by now often prevalent trends, the analysis conducted by Small shows that Canadian party leaders infrequently used language of negativity and rarely attacked opponents on Twitter, indeed with less than 10% of tweets remaining negative in tone. In her analysis, the author also does not find evidence that challengers are more likely than incumbents to go negative on Twitter.

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