

## Citizen participation in the mediated public sphere:

### Characteristics of the Twitter debate during the elections in Belgium

Twitter increases the visibility of ordinary people in public debate. The implied, technological communication structures promise participation and interaction amongst users or the rise of 'networked publics' (Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013), in which political, media and citizen actors are embedded. We conceptualize these networked forms of civic engagement in terms of user autonomy as well as interactivity or a sense of collectivity (Curran, Fenton, & Freedman, 2012), and address to what extend these apply on the Twitter debate during the local elections in Belgium.

Through the analysis of interaction patterns (i.e. @replies) between citizens, media actors and politicians ( $N=2181$ ), we aim to understand Twitter user engagement with politics in a networked media constellation. A network analysis was conducted for four consecutive periods in the election debate via the Social Network Analysis software UCINET (Borgatti, Everett, & Freeman, 2002). Overall, we found limited amounts of interaction amongst large, but variable user groups. The results show the 'quantitative dominance' of citizens in the debates and the 'qualitative dominance' of political and media actors. Although the debates mostly consist of citizen actors, it is media and politicians that hold structurally stronger positions (in terms of messages received/reciprocated). In addition, these actors sustain a more stable (i.e. continuous) presence in the networks, compared to citizen users reflecting more variable levels of engagement.

Empirical insights in the interaction patterns and structural positions of the Twitter users point to the variable constellation of these publics and asymmetric interaction patterns. Our results provide limited evidence for direct and participatory forms of democracy to unfold. To conclude, we suggest further analysis to focus on the content of the messages and a more in-depth understanding of these 'citizen-audiences'. In addition, we discuss particular limits of big data research.

#### Biography

Evelien D'heer is a PhD researcher within the Department of Communication Sciences at Ghent University. Her research focuses on the changing relations between media, politicians and citizens. Through the study of the relations between these three actor types, she aims to conceptualize and understand the networked public sphere in which both traditional and social media are embedded. The concept of agenda setting serves as a guiding concept to investigate the relation between traditional media and social media. Data collection will be centered around the upcoming elections in 2014, occurring both on the national (Belgian) as well as the European level.

Pieter Verdegem is an assistant professor in new media and ICT in the Department of Communication Sciences at Ghent University. He obtained a PhD in communication sciences with a doctoral dissertation on government strategies in the information society (Ghent University, 2009). In 2011 he was a postdoctoral research fellow at Uppsala University's Department of Informatics and Media. His main research interests are in ICT and society, social media, and new media & ICT policies and governance. He

has published on these topics in international peer-reviewed journals. He teaches about new media studies as well as media & ICT structures and policy.

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