

Tweeting the EU elections: A cross-national study

Jakob Linaa Jensen (Aarhus University, Denmark), Stine Lomborg, Jacob Ørmen (Copenhagen University, Denmark), Pieter Verdegem & Evelien d'Heer (Ghent University, Belgium)

The upcoming European elections provide an opportunity for comparative research on political communication. This paper aims to outline the theoretical framework and methodological approach for a cross-national research project that investigates the changing role of the media in the context of political communication.

Mass media have traditionally functioned as the intermediary between society and political institutions. The rise of social media, however, offers the potential for both politicians and citizens to circumvent the media, and directly influence each other. This process potentially results in the emergence of a networked public sphere, in which citizens but also the journalists, political elites and other stakeholders can actively participate in public discourse. The project employs agenda-setting theory, a framework often used in election campaign research, which enables us to explore the changing relationship between the media, political elites and citizens. We combine traditional agenda-setting theory with network analysis to capture the potential and impact of social media for political communication.

By framing the research around an analysis of Twitter communications during the 2014 European elections from a national as well as cross-national perspective, we will investigate (a) how political elites use Twitter for online election campaigning and (b) how and to what extent the national contexts of the elections intersect with the European level.

The projects include studies from a number of countries, geographically spread throughout Europe. The country-specific studies follow the same basic research framework: The political candidates and parties for the EU elections will be the main units of analysis. Twitter accounts of candidates and parties will be followed, using the YourTwapperkeeper infrastructure. This procedure allows for comparative analyses (whereas for a hashtag based approach, this is less likely the case) of how politicians engage with other types of actors in debating issues related to the elections.

The analysis we put forth here is a combined network and content analysis. First step is a 'user-user' network analysis based on mentions, replies and retweets. National

candidates will mention or are mentioned by other users in the debate. Here, it is particularly interesting to see whether these 'other users' reflect accounts of (1) the same country, (2) other countries or (3) to the EU itself. Subsequently, content analyses is applied to a sample of the tweets, identifying overall topics as well as further indications of national versus cross-national focuses within the debates. Besides being the first study of national versus cross-national debates online in relation to EP elections, the project also applies a combined methods approach. Advantages and challenges of such approaches are discussed in detail in the paper.

Biographies:

Jakob Linnaa Jensen is associate professor in media studies at Aarhus University, Denmark. His main research interests are democratic and social consequences of the Internet, with a focus on social media. He has also a strong methodological interest in big data, network analysis and quantitative and qualitative analyses of new media. He has been part of EU Cost Action "Transforming Audiences, Transforming Societies", where he has served as leader of a European task force on social media method. His publication record includes four books and more than 20 journal articles. Among recent publications are edited books "Audience Research Methodologies" (with Geoffroy Patriarche, Helena Bilandzic & Jelena Jurisic) and "Methods for Analyzing Social Media" (with Klaus Bredl and Julia Hünninger), both published by Routledge.

Stine Lomborg is Associate Professor in Communication and IT at the University of Copenhagen. She is the author of 'Social media - social genres. Making sense of the ordinary' (Routledge, 2014).

Pieter Verdegem is Assistant Professor in New Media and Information & Communication Technologies in the Department of Communication Sciences at Ghent University (Belgium). His main research interests are in ICT and society, social media, media & ICT policies and governance. He has published widely on these topics in scholarly journals. Pieter Verdegem lectures New Media Studies (MA programme) and Media Structures and Media Policy (BA programme) in Communication Sciences. He is actively involved in several international networks, amongst other as member of the Management Committee of the COST Action IS0906 Transforming Audiences, Transforming Societies.

Jacob Ørmen is a PhD Fellow at the University of Copenhagen researching individuals' engagement with political news both face-to-face and through various offline as well as online media.

Evelien D'heer is a PhD Fellow at the Department of Communication Sciences at Ghent University (Belgium). Her PhD focuses on the role of social media in the public debate, i.e. the transforming relations between political, media and citizen actors.