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Nederlandse vertaling:

**Sociale media logica en politieke communicatie**

Hoe sociale media de dynamiek tussen politiek, media en publiek veranderen

Op de boekomslog staat een gedigitaliseerde tekening die ik maakte van Antony Gormley's "Breathing Room", tentoongesteld in Londen in de White Cube Gallery in 2010. Voor het maken van de tekening baseerde ik mij op een foto van David Levene, gemaakt voor The Guardian News & Media Ltd.

De "Breathing Room" is een kamer gevuld met matrices gemaakt van buislampen die van uitzicht veranderen wanneer het licht in de kamer sterker of zwakker wordt. Wanneer de kamer volledig donker is, zijn de matrices volledig zichtbaar en worden individuen gereduceerd tot silhouetten. De silhouetten zijn terug identificeerbaar wanneer de kamer volledig verlicht is. Onze genetwerkte media-ecologie wordt gekenmerkt door een gelijkaardige dynamiek. Enerzijds wordt het collectief zichtbaar gemaakt, waardoor het individu naar de achtergrond verdwijnt. Anderzijds maken individuen zichzelf zichtbaar of worden zij zichtbaar gemaakt, waardoor de structuren tijdelijk minder prominent zijn.



Faculteit Politieke & Sociale Wetenschappen

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meets political communication  
**How social media are changing the dynamics  
among politics, the media and the public**

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# Samenvatting

Dit doctoraat behandelt de impact van sociale media op de driehoeksrelatie tussen politiek, de massamedia en het publiek. Politiek is gemedieerd en massamedia zijn voor het publiek de voornaamste bron van politieke informatie. De opkomst van sociale media wordt zowel met optimisme als argwaan onthaald. Enerzijds kunnen burgers via sociale media een stem krijgen in het debat. Anderzijds zijn sociale media extra communicatiekanalen die gedomineerd kunnen worden door de gevestigde elite (politici en journalisten).

Dit doctoraat tracht een middenweg tussen beide perspectieven te bewandelen en focust daarbij op de *logica* van sociale media. Sociale media worden beschouwd als platformen waarop volgens een eigen logica inhoud geproduceerd en gedistribueerd wordt. De logica van sociale media is verschillend van, maar staat in interactie met de logica van de massamedia. Sociale media fungeren dus deels als een autonoom speelveld, maar bepalen *en* worden bepaald door het functioneren van de massamedia en de politiek.

Ons empirisch werk is gestructureerd rond de driehoeksrelatie tussen politiek, de massamedia en het publiek. We onderzochten de impact van sociale media vanuit deze drie perspectieven, waarbij we ons toelagen op de analyse van instituten eerder dan individuen. Vooraleer we een kort overzicht geven van onze studies en de verkregen resultaten, gaan we iets dieper in op de methoden die we hanteerden in deze thesis.

Ons onderzoek beperkt zich tot de socialemedia-platformen Twitter en Facebook. Als onderzoekers hebben we de mogelijkheid om gebruikersdata te verkrijgen van deze bedrijven, zij het met beperkingen wat betreft hoeveelheid en datatype. Niettegenstaande de grote hoeveelheden data die we kunnen bekomen, blijven we voor een deel beperkt in de inzichten die we verwerven. De focus ligt namelijk op gedrag en zichtbaar gedrag in het bijzonder. Verder is het gebruik van socialemedia-data voor sociaalwetenschappelijk onderzoek nog in volle ontwikkeling. We hebben dan ook

getracht om online data waar mogelijk te combineren met offline data, om op die manier de bevindingen te verrijken en te valideren.

In dit doctoraat zijn in totaal vijf empirische studies opgenomen. De eerste twee studies hebben betrekking op het Twitter debat gedurende de verkiezingen van 2012 en 2014. Voor beide perioden hebben we aan de hand van netwerkanalyse de communicatie tussen politici, journalisten en burgers geanalyseerd. We vonden gelijkaardige bevindingen voor beide verkiezingen. Burgers zijn talrijk aanwezig in het debat. Zij spreken vooral politici en journalisten aan, eerder dan onderling te debatteren. Politici en journalisten zijn minder geneigd om met burgers te communiceren, maar doen dit wel met elkaar. Voor de verkiezingen van 2014, hebben we ook partijlidmaatschap gemeten om het principe van politieke homofilie na te gaan. Zowel politici als burgers blijken vooral te communiceren *binnen* de partijlijnen eerder dan *over* de partijlijnen heen.

De derde studie onderzoekt het gebruik van Twitter en Facebook door politici tijdens de verkiezingscampagne van 2014. Op basis van diepte-interviews met politici en een inhoudsanalyse van hun socialemedia-berichten, onderzochten we in welke mate politici sociale media belangrijk vinden en zich gedragen in lijn met de logica van deze platformen. De studie toont aan dat de gepercipieerde relevantie en impact van sociale media het grootst is indien deze platformen in interactie staan met de massamedia. Online populariteit is dus vooral relevant als het publiciteit in de massamedia oplevert.

De vierde studie behandelt de veranderende relatie tussen journalisten en hun publiek op Twitter. Het onderzoek betreft het actualiteitsprogramma 'Terzake' dat wordt uitgezonden op de publieke omroep VRT. Het programma benoemde één van zijn journalisten tot "conversation manager" om de relatie met het publiek interactiever te maken. Een analyse van zijn online gedrag toont dat hij het debat op Twitter faciliteert, maar niet actief deelneemt. Hij probeert zijn rol als objectief en neutraal waarnemer te behouden. Op de redactie heeft Twitter vooral impact als collectief. Journalisten waarderen Twitergedrag van het publiek vooral als feedback op hun werk en als een aanvullend criterium om de waarde van nieuwsitems te bepalen.

De vijfde en laatste studie neemt het Twitterpubliek van het actualiteitsprogramma 'De Zevende Dag' onder de loep. Op basis van een netwerk- en inhoudsanalyse en diepte-interviews onderzochten we hoe televisie beleefd wordt *via* Twitter. Twitter als platform geeft mee vorm aan de manier waarop het publiek reageert op het politieke debat op televisie. We zien dat tweets voornamelijk de inhoud van het programma bespreken, en dus eerder politici dan de moderators kritisch becommentariëren. Stijl is daarbij bijzonder belangrijk. Kijkers proberen gevat uit de hoek te komen en zowel kritisch als grappig te zijn in het formuleren van hun berichten. Het politieke debat op

Twitter wordt gekenmerkt door affectieve en persoonlijke elementen eerder dan informatieve en objectieve elementen.

Algemeen kunnen we stellen dat sociale media de massamedia niet vervangen. De driehoeksrelatie tussen politiek, de massamedia en het publiek blijft bestaan, maar wordt wel uitgebreid. De toegenomen communicatie heeft weldegelijk gevolgen voor de driehoeksrelatie. Journalisten worden geconfronteerd met een toenemend aantal berichten van politici. Deze laatste beslissen zelf wanneer zij journalisten aanspreken en versnellen hierbij de nieuwscyclus. Verder zijn zowel politici als journalisten continu zichtbaar op sociale media en worden zij aangesproken door een gefragmenteerd publiek. Hoewel individuele burgers niet per se gehoord worden, kan hun collectief gedrag op sociale media wel impact hebben op de nieuwscyclus. Samengevat hebben sociale media vooral invloed op de context waarbinnen politieke communicatie plaatsvindt.



# Summary

This thesis investigates the impact of social media on the relation among politics, mass media and the public. Politics is mediated and mass media are an important source of political information for citizens. The advent of social media has been met with optimism as well as pessimism. On the one hand, social media allow for the inclusion of non-elites in the debate. On the other hand, established elites (politicians and journalists) can dominate these platforms.

This thesis argues for a third way between both perspectives, using the concept of *social media logic*. Social media are non-neutral platforms, shaping communication and information flows. The logic of social media is distinct from, but interacts with the logic of mass media. Social media function as a field that is *autonomous from*, as well as *dependent on* the workings of mass media and politics.

Our empirical work is centred on the systems framework of political communication, which defines the triangular relation among politics, mass media and the public. We investigate the impact of social media from these three perspectives and focus our analysis on the institutional level rather than the individual level. Before we elaborate on our studies and findings, we briefly touch upon the methodological aspects of our work.

This thesis considers two social media platforms; that is, Twitter and Facebook. As researchers, we are able to retrieve user data from both companies, albeit with limitations. Notwithstanding the large volumes of user data at our disposal, we are limited in our insights. The focus lies on behaviour, and more specifically visible behaviour. Further, the usage of social media data for social-scientific research is still emerging. Therefore, we made an effort to combine social media data with offline data to enrich and validate the findings.

In total, five empirical papers are included in this thesis. The first two concern the 2012 and 2014 elections in Belgium. For both elections, we analysed communication

patterns between politicians, journalists and citizens on Twitter. Both studies generate comparable findings. The communication networks mostly consist of citizens. They address politicians and journalists, rather than other citizens. Politicians and journalists are significantly less inclined to interact with citizens, but do interact with each other. With respect to the 2014 national elections, we also included party membership to investigate political homophily on Twitter. We found that both politicians and citizens are more likely to interact with like-minded others on Twitter.

The third study investigates politicians' usage of Twitter and Facebook as a campaigning tool. Based on in-depth interviews with politicians and a content analysis of their Twitter and Facebook behaviour, we assess the perceived relevance and strategic adoption of the logic of social media. The findings show the impact of social media lies in the interlinkages with the workings of mass media. Visibility and popularity on social media become relevant when it allows politicians to get mass media coverage.

The fourth study in this thesis concerns the changing relation between journalists working for the public broadcaster VRT and their Twitter audience. The current affairs program 'Terzake' appointed one of its journalists as a dedicated conversation manager to engage in an interactive and mutually beneficent relation with its viewing audience. His online behaviour is predominantly guided by traditional journalistic norms such as objectivity and neutrality. Within the newsroom, the predominant value of Twitter is a "sensory" one, it signals what the audience thinks, likes and dislikes. Social media audience metrics supplement news judgement.

The fifth and final study investigates Twitter usage during the current affairs program 'De Zevende Dag'. Based on the combination of a network analysis, a content analysis and in-depth interviews, we investigate how people make sense of television *through* Twitter. We found that the brevity of the messages and the online context co-define viewers' practices. Tweets mainly discuss the program content and in particular politicians' performances rather than journalists' performances. Further, viewers enjoy writing critical and captivating messages whereby irony and sarcasm are particularly appreciated. In short, political discussion on Twitter is affective, performative and entertaining rather than informative, objective and neutral.

In general, we acknowledge that social media do not replace mass media. The triangular relation among politics, the media and the public is not reconfigured, but expanded. The expansion of communication flows does influence the systems framework. Journalists are encountered with an increase in statements coming from politicians. Politicians provide these statements when the timing is suited for them and thereby accelerate the news cycle. Further, both politicians and journalists are

continuously accessible for feedback from selective audiences. The latter can impact the news cycle as a collective entity. In sum, social media influence the context in which political communication takes place.





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*Every new technology necessitates a new war*  
(McLuhan & Fiore, 1967, p. 98)





# Chapter I

## Introduction

*The purpose of this introductory chapter is threefold. First, we sketch the broader thematic area to which this thesis makes a contribution; that is, political communication. Second, we present the central aim and research questions that guided the work conducted in this thesis. Third, we discuss recent socio-technological developments, situated at the macro-level and narrowed down to politics, mass media and the public.*

Mass media are both vital for and challenging to democracy. On the one hand, mediated political communication provides the conditions for the well-functioning of the public debate (Bennett & Entman, 2001). Through mass media, journalists guarantee information is revealed, opinions are shared and citizens' views are challenged. On the other hand, mass media present a challenge for democracy, as they can have a harmful effect on opinion formation by distorting, highlighting or neglecting information (Habermas, 1992). Both the importance and the threat of mass media for democracy are challenged due to a series of technological, economic and cultural changes. In this thesis, we point to the advent of social media and their potential to disrupt the production and the distribution of political communication, traditionally dominated by politics and mass media. First, social media allow for the inclusion of non-elite actors. This is exemplified by the following two headlines: “*Terzake’ reageert gepikeerd op kritiek: “Zoek een andere hobby”*” [The current affairs debate program ‘Terzake’ is not amused by critique from viewers: “Find a new hobby”]<sup>1</sup> and “*Foute tweet van Leterme zorgt opnieuw voor hilariteit*” [Minister Leterme causes hilarity on Twitter once again]<sup>2</sup>. Using social media, citizens publically comment and evaluate journalists’ and politicians’ actions, contesting both actors’ norms and practices.

Further, social media challenge the position and role of journalists as intermediaries. Politicians can bypass mass media and communicate with voters directly, which would diminish the dependency of politicians upon mass media. As Vincent Van Quickenborne (former minister of the Liberal party and avid Twitter user) proclaimed, social media allow for “a genuine dialogue” between politicians and citizens.<sup>3</sup> However, as Curran, Fenton and Freedman (2012, p. 9) argue, “*the influence of the internet is filtered through the structures and processes of society*”. Therefore, caution is required with respect to the impact of social media, as the outcome remains largely open and mass media continue to play an important role in the production and the circulation of political communication. Alexander De Croo (minister of the Liberal party) argues that Twitter has significantly contributed to his professional career, not because Twitter allows communicating with citizens directly, but because his tweets resulted in mass media coverage.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> (Redactie) (2013, July 23). ‘Terzake’ reageert gepikeerd op kritiek: “Zoek een andere hobby”. *Het Laatste Nieuws*. Retrieved from <http://www.hln.be>

<sup>2</sup> (sg) (2012, February 17). Foute tweet van Leterme zorgt opnieuw voor hilariteit. *De Morgen*. Retrieved from <http://www.demorgen.be>

<sup>3</sup> (SM) (2011, April 18). Vincent Van Quickenborne is hyperactieve minister op Twitter. *Knack*. Retrieved from <http://www.knack.be>

<sup>4</sup> Het nieuws. (2014, January 1). *VTM*. Retrieved from <http://nieuws.vtm.be>

The impact and the integration of social media is characterized by contingencies. The quotes mentioned above show different opportunities, pitfalls and outcomes related to the advent of social media. This thesis provides a systematic inquiry of the impact of social media on political communication “*without resorting to either technological determinism or normalization*” (Klinger & Svensson, 2014, p. 1242). More specifically, we disentangle social media from mass media, arguing that the former are characterized by a distinct logic (Klinger & Svensson, 2014; van Dijck & Poell, 2013). Subsequently, we empirically investigate how social media influence (1) the relation between politics and mass media and (2) the relation between both institutions and citizens.

The growing popularity of social media in political communication also leads to new data sources available to scholars. The empirical work in this thesis taps into social media’s potential for the collection of online behaviour of politicians, journalists and citizens. Whereas the opportunities of social media data are embraced (e.g. bypassing problems associated with self-reported behaviour), the integration and interpretation of social media data is still emerging. This thesis contributes to the emerging field of social media research, using mixed method approaches to enrich and validate social media data.

This chapter begins by sketching a brief evolution of the field of political communication, followed by outlining the aim of this thesis.

## I.I Destabilizing political communication (research)

*“The great thinkers who influenced the contemporary field of political communication were preoccupied with understanding the political, social, psychological, and economic transformations in modern industrial society. But societies have changed so dramatically since the time of these landmark contributions that one must question the continuing relevance of paradigms drawn from them”, (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008, p. 707).*

In what is coined “the era of minimal effects”, Bennet and Iyengar (2008) problematize the field of political communication research in relation to the changing media ecology.<sup>5</sup> The authors question whether the media effects paradigm still allows us to measure

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<sup>5</sup> Note that social media were not mentioned in this article yet.

what we want it to measure. They refer to an earlier call of Chaffee and Metzger (2001) to re-evaluate existing theoretical models in the light of the changing media environment. Chaffee and Metzger (2001) proclaim the end of mass communication (at least in some respects) as people's media experiences become more fragmented and individualized. Later, Karpf, Kreiss and Nielsen (2015) revised the two above mentioned papers, arguing too little has changed since then. Below we provide Karpf and colleagues' critiques and paths ahead, but first we present a bit of background on the dominant lines of thought and inquiry that characterized the field of political communication research. The authors and studies mentioned below are by no means comprehensive of the field of political communication research, but serve as a guide towards the outline of our contribution to the field.

Walter Lippmann's (1922) book "Public opinion" is a seminal work for the study of media effects. Mass media are considered to have profound, direct effects on the public opinion. They shape perceptions of things we have not experienced personally. The "world outside" is too complicated, hence, the masses need simple "pictures in their heads" to guide action (1922, p. 9). According to Lippmann, these pictures should be provided by political elites, but not totalitarian propagandists. At the time (i.e. World War I and the 1930s on), propaganda research constituted an important stream of communication scholarship.

Following, important work by Lazarsfeld and colleagues is worth mentioning. In the book "The people's choice" (1944), Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet argue there is no direct influence of media messages on voting behaviour. Surprisingly, informal, personal contacts were far more decisive than media exposure. In a second study, Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee (1954) argue voting behaviour is related to a number of social variables (such as family, religion and friends). The role of the media lies in the confirmation (instead of the manipulation) of existing preferences. In sum, both studies argue for the minimal effects of media. Whereas Lazarsfeld and colleagues used both qualitative and quantitative methods, their work predominantly influenced survey research on voting behaviour, including variables as party identification and socio-economic status.

With the proliferation of mass media and the rapid growth of television in political campaigns, the return to powerful media effects was set. These developments coincide with the establishment of the field of political communication, initiated by the creation of the Political Communication Division within the International Communication Association in 1973. Political communication scholars' interests were in the empirical analysis of the media's role in the processes of opinion and attitude change of the public. Amongst the more prominent frameworks is McCombs and Shaw's (1972) agenda setting theory. Influenced by Lippmann's work, McCombs and Shaw define indirect

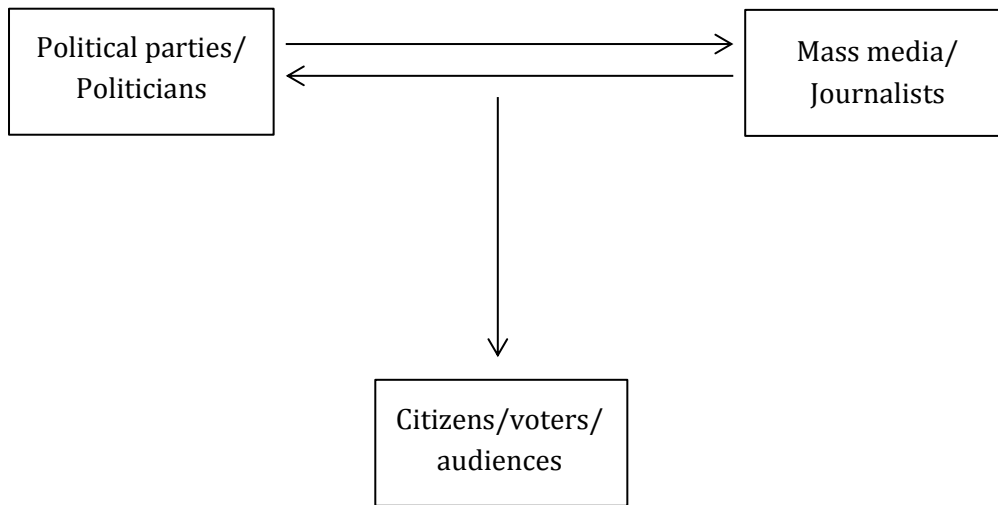
media effects, as media tell people what to think about, rather than what to think. Their theory (and the media effects frame more in general) instigated many follow-up studies, which led to more advanced conceptual and methodological approaches. An early example is Iyengar, Peters and Kinder's (1982) study, relying on experiments whereby participants viewed television news programs that had been modified to highlight specific issues. This allowed to test for agenda-setting (i.e. issue salience) and related, priming effects (i.e. the evaluation of election candidates). Further, Lang and Lang's (1983) work studies the effect of media frames (i.e. salient viewpoints regarding topics) on the formation of public opinion related to the Watergate Scandal.

According to Karpf, Kreiss and Nielsen (2015), contemporary work in political communication is still dominated by the concepts and methods used in the 1980s onwards. Via the use of experiments or surveys, scholars assess public opinion, intentions, attitudes and behaviour (especially during election times). In short, the focus lies on quantitative research, with a focus on short-term behavioural change. Consequently, Krapf and colleagues make a plea for the expansion (not the replacement) of the current theoretical and methodological approaches. They make explicit reference to disciplines as sociology and anthropology and the use of qualitative methods. These approaches emphasize understanding and interpretation over verification and allow for the inductive examination of phenomena in the light of theory generation. The latter is highly valuable considering the changing socio-technological environment in which political communication takes place. Further, Krapf and colleagues point to new methodological approaches in the field of communication studies, such as big data and computational social sciences. These approaches have not yet been fully explored, but do become increasingly popular in the study of political communication (Jungherr, 2015; Petchler & González-Bailón, 2015). In this thesis, we embrace the paths sketched by Krapf and colleagues to study the impact of social media on political communication.

## 1.2 The aim of this thesis

Blumler and Gurevitch's (1995) systems framework of political communication serves as a raw skeleton for our research. The framework is presented graphically in Figure 1. It shows that politicians and journalists are "*involved in the course of message preparation*" (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995, p. 12), understood as the horizontal axis. The vertical axis reflects both institutions' interaction with the public, joint or separately.

Figure 1 The systems framework of political communication



The labels used in Figure 1 are based on Brants and Voltmer’s figure of the triangular framework (2011, p. 4) and tailored to the empirical work conducted in this thesis. Concerning the horizontal axis, we include (1) political parties, politicians, spokesmen or other actors that officially speak on behalf of the party and (2) mass media and mass news media in particular (e.g. newspapers and broadcast news) including journalists working for them. In short, the actors on the horizontal axis are referred to in this thesis as *political* and *media actors*.

Brants and Voltmer (2011) use different labels to discuss the public. Also in this thesis, different terms are used interchangeably, related to the different relations and contexts at stake. Overall, we refer to citizens or *citizen actors*. As discussed in Chapter 3, which contains our empirical studies, we operationalized citizens as individual people that are not affiliated with civil society actors such as unions or other. Further, voters (or the electorate) denote citizens’ relation with politicians during election times. In relation to mass media, we refer to audiences as well as citizens. In this respect, we follow Livingstone (2005), who argues audiences have the capacity to act upon their identity as citizens. As she further argues, citizens denote a category between audiences (as passive and private recipients) and publics (as an engaged collective).

To recapitulate, the triangular framework is linear and top-down, based on a complex inter-institutional relation between politicians and journalists whereby citizens are defined as information receivers. In this thesis, we aim to investigate the impact of social media on the systems framework. As we explain below, our analyses are situated at the institutional rather than the individual level.

The aim of this thesis is very plainly expressed as follows:

*To what extent and how do social media reconfigure the triangular relation among political, media and citizen actors?*

We use the term relation because we do not only focus on communication from and to the respective actors on social media (e.g. reciprocity). We also account for the positions they hold in the communication networks (e.g. central versus peripheral). Further, we assess the perceived value and impact of social media on the relative roles of the respective actors (e.g. as senders versus receivers or as invisible masses versus active individuals). With respect to social media, we particularly point to Twitter and Facebook. Both platforms take central positions in political campaigning and the political news cycle more in general (Broersma & Graham, 2012; Chadwick, 2013; Jungherr, 2014b; Larsson & Kalsnes, 2014; Lilleker, Tenscher, & Štětka, 2014).

The overarching aim of this thesis is broken down in two research questions (RQ) that support the work performed and reported here:

*RQ1: How do social media shape political communication?*

*RQ2: How do social media data contribute to our understanding of the changing relation among political, media and citizen actors?*

The first research question alludes to the logic that characterizes social media and how it is distinct from the logic of mass media. The concept of media logic is already used to understand the interdependencies between mass media and politics (Esser, 2013; Strömbäck, 2008). It fits within the mediatization framework, and more specifically, the institutional perspective (Lundby, 2014). Whereas effect studies focus on individuals' opinions and behaviour, the concept of media logic looks for the transformation of institutions in society such as politics and the extent to which politics adheres to the workings of mass media, which is equally understood as an institution. It deals with selected aspects of political communication; that is, the media-politics interplay rather than the public opinion. Since the concept of media logic emerged in relation to mass media, it is in need of adaptation to the changing media ecology. Consequently, this thesis extends the mediatization framework by including emerging readings of media logic (as explained more in detail in Chapter 2). We integrate van Dijck and Poell's (2013) principles of social media logic and Klinger and Svensson's (2014) concept of network media logic. In analogy with the concept of media logic, we account for the non-neutral character of social media in shaping communication and information. Further, the concept of social media logic applies to the relation between mass media and politics, as well as each of these institutions' relation with citizens.

The second research question refers to the use of social media as a method for social-scientific research. Social media generate new research opportunities for the study of communication by politicians, journalists as well as citizens. However, deriving meaning from social media data is challenging as it requires additional methodological approaches as well as the re-interpretation of existing ones (Jungherr, 2015). This thesis contributes to the development of social media as a method, assessing different aspects of the research cycle; that is, data sampling, analysis and reporting. In Chapter 2, we account for the specificities, meaning and value of social media data for the analysis of political communication.

In sum, this thesis tackles the underlying structures of political communication. We contribute to the realignment of the systems framework with the changing media environment and the advent of social media in particular. We do so by including the perspective of each of the three actors that make up the systems framework. As will become clear below and in the following chapters, the work conducted sits at the crossroads of political communication research, journalism studies, audience studies and social media research.

The remainder of this chapter is organized as follows. We start with a macro-level perspective, outlining a number of relevant tendencies that characterize developed Western societies to date. Next, we discuss relevant literature with respect to the institutions under inquiry; politics and mass media, how they relate to citizens and vice versa.

### I.3 A macro perspective: The acceleration of technology, society and everyday life

We take a moment to reflect on what has been dubbed the “era of continuous connectivity” (Semetko & Scammell, 2012, p. 1) in the 2012 SAGE handbook of political communication. The advent of social media (and the internet in general) is part of broader societal developments, as described by social theorists (Bauman, 2000; Beck, 1999; Beck, Giddens, & Lash, 1994; Rosa, 2013). An interesting metaphor to reflect about the human condition to date is Bauman’s (2000) “liquid modernity”. In short, he argues that change is the only constant. People’s personal trajectories as well as societies’ structures and institutions are increasingly fluid. In a similar manner, Rosa (2013) defines the acceleration of society. Although he is less known internationally, this German sociologist produced an extensive, critical analysis of time in contemporary



society. We address the main tenets of his model below, as they are of particular relevance to situate the emergence and proliferation of social media. Note that Rosa makes no explicit reference to the internet or social media. Distinguishing three types of acceleration (that consecutively reinforce one another), Rosa (2013) defines: (1) technological acceleration, (2) the acceleration of social change and (3) the acceleration of the pace of life.

*Technological acceleration* reflects advancements in transport, communication and technology. These allow for the compression of time and space and in extension contribute to processes of globalization. Well before the advent of the internet, McLuhan (1962, 1964) discussed the construction of a global village, related to the evolutions in mass media (such as satellite images). In a similar manner, Castells (1996) presents society as a network-like structure, expanding the access and exchange of information and ideas. Capitalism is understood as the key propeller of these technological advancements (Rosa, 2013). Growth and acceleration become an “inescapable compulsion” (p. 161), reflecting processes of production, distribution as well as consumption. In this respect, the network society is first and foremost a capitalist society (e.g. Fuchs, 2008; Schiller, 2000). The advent and development of social media are indispensably linked to their economic value. Concerning social media in particular, van Dijck and Poell (2013) emphasize their techno-economic dimension. Social media aim to program our behaviour towards more interactivity (or growth). In turn, our activities are catalogued, processed and sold.

Rosa’s second and consecutive type of acceleration is *the acceleration of social change*. It describes the increasing rate by which values, fashions, lifestyles and other customs alter. Related, so does the range of possibilities. As Bauman (2000) argues, we have no choice but to choose our own life trajectories. This reflects the de-institutionalization and individualization of personal biographies as the nuclear family, social class, the nation state and gender roles are increasingly in state of flux. It does not mean class distinctions vanish, but they do become relativized in favour of fragmented identities and the multiplication of social contexts in which we operate (Dahlgren, 1995). In extension, we encounter the growing volatility of political voting behaviour (in combination with the rise of the educated and better-informed voter). Citizens move away from nation-based politics, and party membership and identification are in decline in favour of personal and self-determined civic engagement (Giddens, 1991; Inglehart, 1997). Deuze (2008) describes changes in news production, labelled “liquid journalism”, as a response to the changes in news consumption. He makes reference to Schudson’s (1999) concept of “monitorial citizenship”, as people act as shoppers searching for media content that tailors their personal preferences. Social media both exemplify and support these social changes. They provide individualized social contexts and encourage

the accelerated reflexivity of our identities through continuous monitoring, updating and editing of the self (Papacharissi & Easton, 2013).

Following the changing socio-technological environment, Rosa (2013) defines *the acceleration of the pace of life*. It reflects the feeling of stress and the lack of time people experience in the organization of their day-to-day activities, the compression of activities in a very tight time schedule and multi-tasking behaviour. These tendencies are in contrast with the technological developments which would allow us to have more time. Another contradiction lies in the growing number of possible experiences we can choose from and their concentration in time. A richer life becomes harder to achieve the faster we run for it. Hence, the acceleration of society is unavoidably linked to the experience of time standing still, which is the result of the self-reinforcing feedback loop of the three above-mentioned types of acceleration.

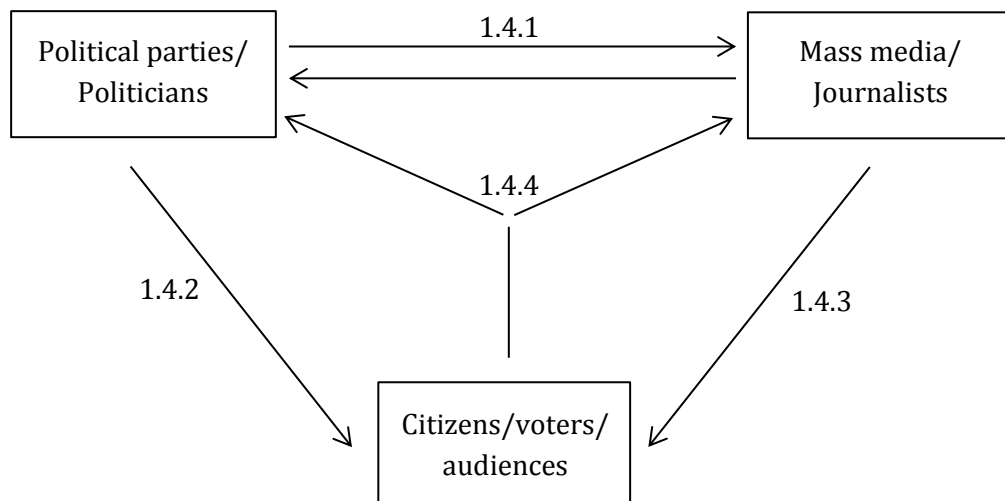
Acceleration itself becomes an autonomous force; that is, an objective in and of itself. It does not only impact the everyday texture of social life, but has consequences for institutions as well. More specifically, Rosa (2013) talks about the “desynchronization” of politics, as social and technological changes exceed political institutions’ potential to keep up. This shows in the deregulation and responsabilization of individual citizens, which is argued to reflect a pessimistic future for politics (and democracy in general) (Rosa, 2013). Whether or not we value these evolutions, the notion of desynchronization very well describes the challenges of established institutions. Politics and mass media alike encounter techno-societal changes at an accelerated pace, resulting in (perceived) decreases of control and autonomy. Whereas Rosa predominantly emphasizes time as something people need to adapt to, we can equally argue that the importance of time makes it a strategic resource which can be used in one’s advantage. We address these tensions more in detail below, but for now, we would like to stress that institutions are shaped by (and shape) the acceleration of society. Social media platforms embody the three types of acceleration discussed above. As such, they form a concrete challenge for the established practices and logics that characterize the two institutions of interest here; politics and mass media.

### I.4 The triangular relation among politics, the media and the public revisited

Our literature review is structured along the systems framework of political communication (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995) as graphically presented in Figure 2. First,

we discuss the role of social media with respect to the relation between the two institutions represented in the systems framework; that is, politics and mass media. Following, we discuss politicians' relation with voters and journalists' relation with their audiences. Last, we take the perspective of citizens, who manifest themselves on social media to engage in the political debate. The review provided below is non-exhaustive, but serves to contextualize the studies executed and included in this thesis.

Figure 2 The systems framework of political communication revisited



### 1.4.1 The political-media complex<sup>6</sup>

As Chadwick (2013) argues, media systems in Western mass democracies have become hybrid media systems. Mass media and social media have become intertwined, challenging and changing the nature of news, including the relation between politicians and journalists. Twitter is part of journalists' "awareness system" (Hermida, 2010) and political journalists incorporate Twitter in their routines to keep up with campaign developments during elections (Parmelee, 2013b; Rogstad, 2013; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2014). In addition, the integration of Twitter in journalists' routines is visible in media coverage as journalists often quote politicians' social media messages in newspaper articles (Broersma & Graham, 2013; Paulussen & Harder, 2014).

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<sup>6</sup> "The political-media complex" is the title of an article written by Swanson (1992). In the article, Swanson denounces political communication in the US and in particular the close relation between media and politics and the way each is practiced. Here, the title signifies that politics and media are interdependent, but characterized by distinct goals and logics.

Within the mediatization literature, scholars acknowledge the growing dependency of politicians upon mass media (Asp, 2014; Strömbäck, 2008). Since political journalists incorporate social media in their practices and routines, politicians can use these platforms to retrieve media coverage by tailoring their messages according to the workings of mass media. Politicians' anticipatory behaviour on social media therefore contributes to *and* is reflective of the mediatization of politics. (Strömbäck & Esser, 2014a). Hence, we take an *actor-centric* mediatization perspective (Schulz, 2014) as we define the impact of mass media by assessing politicians' behaviour and adaptation to the logic of mass media. Building upon Sjöblom's (1968) theory of party behaviour in multiparty systems, Strömbäck and Van Aelst (2013) argue that "the electoral arena" increases the likelihood that politicians adapt to the logic of mass media. More so, the focus lies on the presentational, or "symbolic" side of politics, as image building and attractiveness towards voters is of predominant importance (Esser, 2013). In this case, politicians' adaptation to the logic of mass media is strategic.

The workings of mass news media are described by the concept of news media logic (Esser, 2013). We explain this concept more in detail in Chapter 2. For now, we emphasize that the internal workings of news media are characterized by professional and commercial aspects that manifest themselves in the way news is selected and presented (Mazzoleni, 1987; Vliegenthart, Boomgaarden, & Boumans, 2011). As previously mentioned, politicians' awareness of the workings of news media allows them to proactively tailor their message accordingly in order to retrieve positive coverage. However, the coverage politicians aim to retrieve is not necessarily in line with journalists' selection and framing practices, including news values as conflict and negativity. Broersma and Graham (2012) studied UK and Dutch newspapers' use of Twitter as a source during election times. The findings indicate British newspapers cover politicians' "bad practices" on Twitter and messages that fit the conflict frame (e.g. whereby one politician attacks another). Further, coverage in the Netherlands shows most attention goes to the more prominent politicians (Broersma & Graham, 2012). This relates to journalists' selection practices, as they are inclined to cover powerful politicians (Vos, 2014). Related, lower-profile politicians attribute more power to the media compared to higher-profile politicians (Van Aelst et al., 2008). Nevertheless, the election context, in which journalists strive for more balanced coverage (Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006), provides opportunities for lower-profile politicians to retrieve media coverage.

In sum, the first line of research in this thesis is concerned with the role of social media in reinforcing existing relations between politicians and journalists. This is somewhat contradictory to the dominant line of research on politicians' use of social media, which predominantly focuses on the establishment of closer connections with voters (see sub-section 1.4.2 below). Nonetheless, studies have shown politicians are

aware that journalists are amongst their audiences on Twitter and also interact with journalists via Twitter (e.g. Ausserhofer & Maireder, 2013; Enli & Skogerbø, 2013; Graham, Broersma, & Hazelhoff, 2013). This thesis elaborates on politicians' use of Twitter to retrieve attention from journalists, using media logic as a conceptual framework. In particular, Study III included in this thesis (see Chapter 3) draws from in-depth interviews and a content analysis of politicians' social media messages to investigate how and to what extent politicians tailor their social media activity to retrieve mass media coverage. Our conceptual work integrates the concept of news media logic (which concerns mass media) and the concept of social media logic in order to understand mass media dependency whilst accounting for the changing media environment. In addition, Studies I and II (see Chapter 3) describe Twitter conversation networks among political, media and citizen actors during election times. These studies add to our qualitative work as they provide structural insights into the visible communication patterns between political and media actors.

#### **1.4.2 Politicians and their voters**

Social media allow politicians to bypass mass media and communicate with voters directly. A lot of academic research draws from the empirical analysis of politicians' online behaviour, in search for evidence of an interactive relation with citizens. Most research focuses on Twitter (Ausserhofer & Maireder, 2013; Bruns & Highfield, 2013; Graham, Broersma, & Hazelhoff, 2013; see Jungherr, 2014b for an extensive overview; Larsson & Ihlen, 2015; Thimm, Dang-Anh, & Einspänner, 2014) whereas Facebook is less documented (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013; Klinger, 2014; Ross, Fountaine, & Comrie, 2015). However, it is Facebook rather than Twitter that is used by politicians to reach voters, as it has a larger and more diverse set of users (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013; Klinger, 2014). The above mentioned studies are based on content and/or network approaches that allow to categorize politicians' messages, assess politicians' level of interaction with citizens and their positions in the election debate.

Politicians' social media behaviour is often interpreted between "broadcasting" on the one hand and "interaction/dialogue" on the other (Graham, Broersma, Hazelhoff, & van 't Haar, 2013; Klinger, 2014; Larsson & Ihlen, 2015). Scholars argue in favour of social media's potential to reconnect politicians and citizens, and in extension rejuvenate democracy (Coleman, 2005; Graham, Broersma, & Hazelhoff, 2013). Overall, the findings show interaction and dialogue between politicians and citizens is limited, despite the affordances of social media to do so. As Klinger (2014) argues, politicians do not "master the art of social media", but stick to one-to-many communication when using social media.

In this thesis, we follow Klinger and Svensson (2014, p. 1242), who argue that the concept of network media logic presents an alternative framework to “*the rather deterministic arguments that either portray the internet as the solution to all of the problems liberal democracies face, or as merely reinforcing the existing political practices and power balances*”. They draw on Altheide and Snow’s (1979) concept of media logic, arguing social media are non-neutral in shaping information and communication, but in a different way than mass media are. The concept of network media logic will be discussed extensively in the Chapter 2, integrated in a comparative framework on mass media logic versus social media logic.

In Study III (see Chapter 3), we apply the concept of social media logic on politicians’ use of social media to communicate with voters directly. Study III does not only focus on social media to retrieve mass media coverage (as discussed in sub-section 1.4.1), it also investigates to what extent politicians acknowledge and adopt the workings of social media. Our framework integrates social media’s possibilities for two-way communication with voters, but also points to a number of additional dimensions of social media that can influence politicians’ behaviour. Further, Studies I and II (see Chapter 3) outline communication patterns on Twitter among political, media and citizen actors. These studies provide insight in the extent to which conversations between political and citizen actors occur. Study II in particular also investigates to what extent conversation occurs between like-minded others (i.e. along party lines), as social media allow for the construction of personal publics based on individual preferences (Klinger & Svensson, 2014).

### **1.4.3 Journalists and their audiences**

The changing socio-technological environment has inspired (or required) journalism scholars to revise conventional notions of news production and consumption (Deuze, 2005, 2008). With respect to political communication, the hybridized nature of contemporary news systems is characterized by the inclusion of citizens expressing thought and opinion via social media (Chadwick, 2013). The audience makes itself visible and potentially co-defines news and information flows.

In practice, the integration of audience material in journalists’ established routines is met with ambivalence. Hermida and Thurman (2008) talk about “a clash of cultures”, as journalists struggle to integrate audience activity. Professional journalism is characterized by rules, norms and practices related to the selection and production of news. User-generated content generates contingencies, as established conventions about quality, relevance and credibility are challenged. Studies on the integration of audience contributions in the newsroom suggest that journalists accept and embrace

audience material (Domingo et al., 2008; Jönsson & Örnebring, 2011), although it is still subject to traditional journalistic norms (Chung, 2007; Domingo, 2008; Hermida & Thurman, 2008; Paulussen, Heinonen, Domingo, & Quandt, 2007). Notable exceptions are breaking news (Heinrich, 2011; Hermida, 2010; Vis, 2013), coverage of places where access for foreign journalists is limited (Van Leuven, Heinrich, & Deprez, 2015) and hyperlocal news (Paulussen & D'heer, 2013). Not unimportant, user-generated content has economic benefits in these aforementioned examples (Vujnovic et al., 2010), as it allows for a more cost-efficient production of news content.

Whereas audience participation is fairly absent in the early stages of the news production process, audience interaction with news products does become visible via clicks, shares, comments or tweets (Craft, Vos, & Wolfgang, 2015; Graham, 2012; Tandoc, 2014). While early ethnographic research has shown that journalists tend to ignore (if not reject) audience feedback (e.g. Gans, 1979), this becomes increasingly difficult. The impact of the visible audience is relevant in the context of two conflicting logics at play for mass news media; that is, a normative logic and a market logic (Landerer, 2013). The former reflects journalists' public service ideals and the latter reflects the commercial imperatives news organizations encounter. Audiences are addressed as citizens as well as consumers.

Audiences as consumers push news organizations in the direction of more sensational news (Napoli, 2003). Detailed audience statistics (e.g. page visits) add to (but do not replace) professional newsworthiness criteria (Anderson, 2011; Domingo, 2008; Tandoc, 2014). Tandoc (2014) in particular defines the "de-selection" of news articles, as journalists re-order web pages or replace articles based on dips or rises in website traffic. Trending topics on Twitter are used in a similar manner (Tandoc & Vos, 2015).

Journalists also monitor the actual content of audience feedback, accounting for complaints and acknowledging different viewpoints (Tandoc & Vos, 2015). In doing so, audience members are conceived as citizens, holding journalists to account (Craft et al., 2015). Further, journalists argue audience comments can contribute to editorial content as they bring new perspectives and arguments to the debate (Graham, 2012; Tandoc & Vos, 2015). As aggregates, social media users account for the significance of particular events or issues amongst the public (Anstead & O'Loughlin, 2015; Paulussen & Harder, 2014).

In this thesis, we add to the emerging work on the impact of social media audiences on journalists' practices. More specifically, we account for the mediated nature of journalists' relation with their audiences. Again, we point to the concept of social media logic, as conceptualized in Chapter 2, and how it interacts with the logic of mass news

media (as reflective of journalists' practices). Study IV (see Chapter 3) in particular investigates how journalists, working for the Flemish current affairs program 'Terzake', use social media to interact with their viewing audience. Via online and offline inquiry, we aim to understand how tweeting viewers are interpreted and integrated in the newsroom. Further, studies I and II (see Chapter 3) assess communication patterns on Twitter between political, media and citizen actors. These studies provide insight in the extent to which conversation between media and citizen actors occurs and who takes central positions in the debate.

#### **1.4.4 Citizens as additional actors in political communication**

Compared to politicians and journalists, citizens are the most numerous but least powerful and least organized actors of the systems framework of political communication (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995). It is mass media that are considered to take a central role in informing and engaging citizens in political processes such as elections. Further, the mediatization of politics focuses on politicians and the media logic to which they adapt, but does not attribute much attention to the public (Witschge, 2014). However, citizens cannot be left undiscussed when investigating the impact of social media on the triangular framework.

Below, we bring together a number of relevant findings regarding citizens' use of social media to engage with mass mediated politics. Following Livingstone (2005), we argue audiences have the potential to act upon their identity as citizens. Further, we acknowledge the citizen debate that is articulated via social media is informal, messy, includes affective elements and mixes with everyday sociability (Coleman, 2013; Dahlgren, 2009). As Dutton (2009) argues, networked users can function as a "fifth estate", scrutinizing mass media and holding politicians to account. In a similar manner, Rosanvallon (2008) describes political activity in contemporary society as "surveillance" or oversight, which reflects vigilant citizens and the organization of people as watchdogs.

Research has shown news is increasingly consumed and distributed via social networks (Hermida, Fletcher, Korell, & Logan, 2012; Singer, 2014; Villi, 2012). In doing so, social media users judge what is valuable, interesting or entertaining for themselves as well as the users they are connected to. In addition to the re-distribution of content, users also comment and discuss traditional news content (Anstead & O'Loughlin, 2011; Craft et al., 2015; Elmer, 2012; Selva, 2016). In particular, we point to Twitter as a "political backchannel" (Kalsnes, Krumsvik, & Storsul, 2014) for current affairs debate programs and political talk shows. Viewers engage in real-time debates on television broadcasts, exposing both journalists and politicians to direct public scrutiny. In this



respect, Twitter becomes a crucial element in what Chadwick (2013) defines as the hybrid media system.

Concerning the study of social media as a backchannel, research focuses on the description and interpretation of viewers' online behaviour. Scholars embrace the benefits of unobtrusive measures to understand the meaning making processes viewers engage in. First, a clear relation is found between TV broadcasts and peaks in Twitter activity during election campaigns (Anstead & O'Loughlin, 2011; Bruns & Burgess, 2011; Larsson & Moe, 2012). More in general, TV programs often appear in Twitter's trending topics, hence, are amongst the more popular issues discussed on the micro-blogging service (Deller, 2011). Second, content analyses of Twitter messages show that users refer to the topics that are discussed on television (Buschow, Schneider, & Ueberheide, 2014; Kalsnes et al., 2014). Citizens share their opinions on the issues presented by the media, rather than challenging the media agenda. Further, evaluations of politicians' performances are particularly common as well (Anstead & O'Loughlin, 2011; Elmer, 2012; Kalsnes et al., 2014). These evaluations can be supportive as well as critical and are often brought with humour. Third, research showed the use of @replies to instigate conversation are not commonly applied (Anstead & O'Loughlin, 2011; Kalsnes et al., 2014; Larsson, 2013). Users are engaged with television content rather than each other.

Overall, research on social media use in relation to broadcast content is still emerging (Bredl, Ketzer, Hünninger, & Fleischer, 2014). As the overview above shows, quantitative approaches based on users' online behaviour prevail. In this thesis, we study Twitter as a backchannel during political debates, but rely on the combination of quantitative behavioural data and in-depth interviews (see Study V, Chapter 3). The purpose of Study V is to understand how people make sense of televised political debates *through* Twitter, and in extension, the utility and value of social media data for audience research. This study complements Studies III and IV, which takes politicians' and journalists' perspective on the impact social media on their relation with citizens. Last, we point to Studies I and II (see Chapter 3), which investigate how citizen actors are positioned in the Twitter election debate (as opposed to media and political actors).



# Chapter 2

## Research design

*The purpose of this chapter is to present the conceptual design and methodological considerations behind the research conducted. We elaborate on the key concepts that guided our empirical work and discuss the use of social media data for social-scientific research. We start with a schematic overview of the studies included in this thesis.*

Figure 3 situates the five studies included in this thesis on Blumler and Gurevitch's (1995) systems framework of political communication discussed earlier. Second, Table 1 provides the research aims, the method and data used in the five studies that make up this thesis.

Figure 3 The systems framework of political communication under investigation

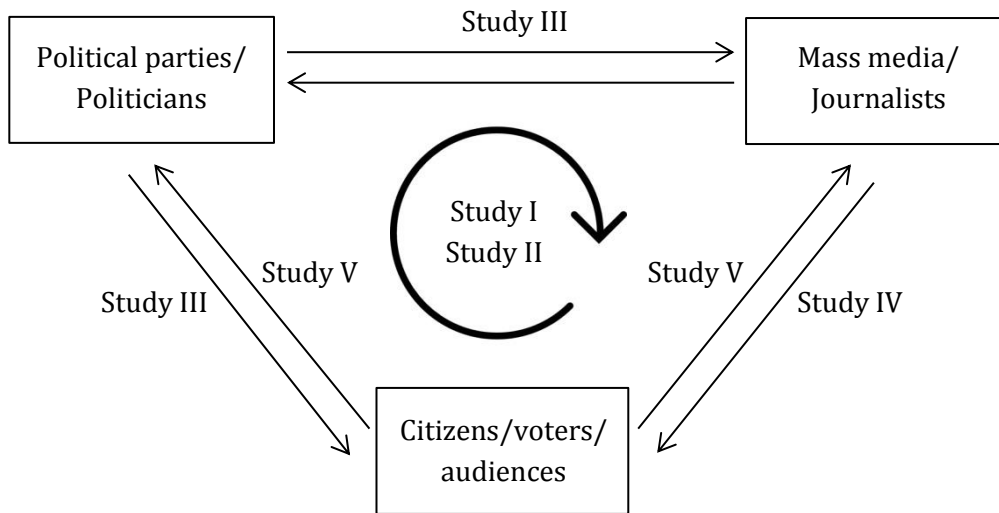


Table 1 Studies included in this thesis

<b>Title</b>	<b>Aims/Questions</b>	<b>Material</b>	<b>Method(s)</b>
I - "Conversations about the elections on Twitter: Towards a structural understanding of Twitter's relation with the political and the media field"	- Conceptualizing social media as a field - Assessing differences in network positions and practices between political, media and citizen actors	Twitter messages on the 2012 local elections, collected via the dedicated hashtag (#vk2012)	Social network analysis
II - "The logic of Twitter networks: A social network analysis perspective on communication patterns among political, media and citizen actors"	- Assessing differences in network positions and practices between political, media and citizen actors. - Assessing political homophily	Twitter messages on the 2014 national elections, collected via the dedicated hashtags (#vk14/2014)	Social network analysis
III - "What media logics are at play? Towards an alternative framework to study politicians' use of social media during election times"	- Conceptualizing social media logic in relation to mass media logic - Assessing the impact of social media versus mass media	Facebook and Twitter messages from a selection of politicians during the 2014 election campaign	- Content analysis - In-depth interviews
IV - "@THEVIEWER: Analyzing the offline and online impact of a dedicated conversation manager in the newsroom of a public broadcaster"	- How do journalists manage audience discussion on Twitter? - What is the value of the tweeting viewer in the newsroom?	Twitter messages about the current affairs TV program 'Terzake', collected in 2013 via the dedicated hashtag (#terzaketv)	- Social network analysis - In-depth interviews - Newsroom inquiry
V - "What social media data mean for audience studies: a multidimensional investigation of Twitter use during a current affairs TV program"	- How do audiences discuss political content on Twitter? - What are the challenges interpreting Twitter audience practices?	Twitter messages about the current affairs TV program 'De Zevende Dag', collected in 2012 via the dedicated hashtag (#7dag)	- Social network analysis - Content analysis - In-depth interviews

The proliferation of communication and information channels requires "*scholars and practitioners to constantly reassess their research priorities*" (Semetko & Scammell, 2012, p. 4). The "era of continuous connectivity" (2012, p. 1) does not only challenge the workings of media and politics, but equally impacts academic research. In particular, we point to the advent and proliferation of social media and the methodological and conceptual challenges these platforms pose for researchers.

## 2.I Conceptual design

Given the volumes of data at our disposal, it is very tempting to get to the data first and come up with a story after. More so, tech gurus as Anderson (2008) have proclaimed “the end of theory”. Based on statistical algorithms, meaningful patterns can be *found* in the data. In this respect, Kitchin (2014) warns for the creation of data-driven rather than knowledge-driven science. Social theory and contextual inquiry are needed in order to make sense of the data. “*It is one thing to identify patterns; it is another to explain them*” (Kitchin, 2014, p. 8). Regardless of the size of the datasets we deal with as social media scholars, we emphasize the need for a conceptual framework to analyse and interpret social media data. Before we discuss the methods applied on social media data, we start this chapter with an outline of our theoretical work. We make an effort to conceptualize the dimensions that make up the logic of social media. The concept of social media logic is integrated in the broader mediatization framework, which to date predominantly focuses on the logic of mass media. We begin with long-standing sociological work, and in particular, Bourdieu’s rich stock of ideas.

### 2.I.1 Integrating mediatization with Bourdieu’s field theory

Bourdieu is not a media theorist. Although this is quite evident, we would like to stress the importance of the conceptualization of society, and its respective social fields, in order to understand the role and impact of (social) media. Couldry (2003) values Bourdieu’s (1984, 1993) field theory as it offers a sociological (read: less media-centric) account of the power of media. His main argument is built around the idea of media *meta* capital, which reflects the impact of media on a variety of social fields. However, it is not clear what properties and processes permit the media to acquire this meta capital. Further, Couldry does not integrate but adapts Bourdieu’s field theory, going beyond Bourdieu’s conception of society as a number of separate, yet interrelated fields. In this thesis, we value Bourdieu’s differentiated nature of social space. Media, as a field, has an impact on other fields, but we must assume the impact is different for each of the respective fields.

According to Benson (2009), the promises of the field approach are in the opportunities to describe and explain variations in media logic. Therefore, Bourdieu offers a valid contribution to the “social theory deficit” that is attributed to the mediatization framework (Couldry, 2014). The relation between mediatization and media influence is contested, resulting in debate and counter-debate on its prepositions and applicability. More specifically, mediatization is argued to lack conceptual clarity, empirical verification and is overly media-centric (Deacon & Stanyer, 2014; Andreas

Hepp, Hjarvard, & Lundby, 2015). We argue these critiques are less applicable to the institutionalist perspective on mediatization, as it allows for the operationalization of the influence of media, making use of the concept of media logic (Altheide & Snow, 1979) and more specifically news media logic (Esser, 2013). In extension, the same can be done for other institutions, such as politics, characterized by a political logic (Esser, 2013; Meyer, 2002). However, as argued by Chadwick (2013), media logic scholars do not always acknowledge the mutual adaptation of media logic and the logics that characterize other spheres in society.

For Bourdieu, the mutual dependency of fields and their respective rules and logics is at the heart of his theory. In short, Bourdieu understands social reality as *fundamentally relational* (Hilgers & Mangez, 2014). Before we explain the main tenets of Bourdieu's field approach, we would like to stress the notion of field is first and foremost an analytical concept, rather than a description of reality (Hilgers & Mangez, 2014; Lahire, 2014). Likewise, Hjarvard (2015) understands media logic as a metaphor. Metaphors as field (and logic) cannot be found in a literal sense, but are particularly useful to understand the inner dynamics and orders, how they are different from other fields (and logics) and influence other fields (and logics). Further, we argue fields, institutions and logics are interchangeable to a very large extent. They all operate at meso-level, but use different jargon to describe internal processes and the externalization of rules and practices. Following, we discuss how they add to and interact with each other.

In this thesis, we particularly value Bourdieu's field theory to understand relations among fields rather than the positioning of the different actors within the fields. According to Bourdieu (1984, 1993), a field is an arena of social or cultural production that consists of agents that comprise positions within the field and are in a dynamic relation with one-another. In addition, it is characterized by tacit rules and presuppositions that organize action within the field (i.e. *Doxa*) and the belief that the game (i.e. the struggle over capital) is worth playing (i.e. *Illusio*) (Bourdieu, 1990). Fields are strategic arenas, in which agents struggle to maximize their positions (based on the accumulation of capital). Last, *habitus* reflects both the individual and the collective. In addition, it is field specific, e.g. journalists have a professional "journalistic habitus", an "embodied" feel for the game (Willig, 2013) and are situated within the "journalistic field" (Benson & Neveu, 2005). The conceptualization of journalistic habitus and field links up to Esser's (2013) description of news media logic, as it also describes journalism as a profession. Further, Benson and Neveu (2005) acknowledge the journalistic field is strongly dominated by the external pressures of economic power which in turn links up to the commercial aspect of news media logic (Esser, 2013).

Further, Bourdieu (1991) defines "the political field" which is reflective of, but can go beyond, institutional politics, parties and professional politicians. In line with his focus

on the struggle over power, the political field is characterized by political mobilization. Politicians need to mobilize social support such as votes (i.e. political capital) in order to capture positions of power (Swartz, 2013). The field is thus externally oriented, as it needs to derive its legitimacy from citizens (which is very different from the internally oriented scientific field for example) (Hilgers & Mangez, 2014). The conceptualization of the political field resembles the concept of “political logic” (Esser, 2013; Meyer, 2002), and more specifically the politics dimension; that is, the legitimation of one’s political program amongst the public. The concept of political logic further defines a second dimension; policy or the political decision making process (Meyer, 2002; Esser, 2013). The concept of political logic is somewhat distinct from the political field as the former describes the internal workings of politics as an institution, whereas Bourdieu predominantly focuses on the rationale of the respective actors concerning the consolidation of their positions of power. In this thesis, the political field is reflective of political parties and professional politics and, following Bourdieu, political logic is mainly conceived as political actors’ efforts to attain or maintain power.

We propose the conception of social media as a field that is separate from but interacts with the journalistic and the political field. Hence, we place it outside traditional news media organizations. The changing media environment gives greater importance to the understanding of the boundaries of journalism, but equally makes it the biggest challenge (Shoemaker & Reese, 2013, p. 96). Whereas we acknowledge the “hybridity” (Chadwick, 2013) of the contemporary media environment, we do feel it is fruitful to make an analytical distinction between mass media (as reflective of the “journalistic field”) and social media. Social media are understood as a field in the sense that it reflects an arena of social activity, which has its own *modus operandi*, characteristics and structured positions. We do acknowledge the study of the political and the media field is historically informed and well documented in the literature. Bourdieu’s field theory has been appropriated on the participatory web or “web 2.0” (Song, 2010) and social network technologies in particular (Papacharissi & Easton, 2013), but to our knowledge these are the only examples. In sub-section 2.1.3 we elaborate on the inner workings of social media as a field.

### **2.1.2 Bourdieu’s public sphere: A social space of interrelated fields**

We define social media as a field to conceptualize and empirically assess its relation with the political and the journalistic field. According to Benson (2009), Bourdieu would conceptualize the public sphere as a series of overlapping fields, including amongst others the political field and the economic field, and at the centre, the journalistic field. Each of the fields competes to impose its legitimate vision of the social world. In short,



there is a struggle over symbolic power; that is, “*the capacity to impose classifications and meanings as legitimate*” (Swartz, 2013, p. 38). In this respect, Bourdieu takes a social constructionist perspective on the symbolic struggle over life, as different groups compete to impose their respective views and representations on the social world. In a similar manner, we argue that social media provide opportunities for journalists, politicians and citizens alike to contribute to the public debate. Of particular relevance here is the conception of social media, as non-neutral transmitters of these views and representations (cf. the *logic* of social media) and the linkages between social media and the journalistic and the political field.

The linkages between fields, or in Bourdieu’s terms, intra-field relations, allow us to understand how the different fields and their respective logics influence one another. Again, we bring together Bourdieu’s field perspective and mediatization’s conception of media influence. Of particular interest here is Bourdieu’s notion of field autonomy or the way it generates and acts upon its own values or “logic” (i.e. heteronomy) or acts alike other fields (i.e. homology). Bourdieu uses the language of homology to explain the effects on fields, which are never direct, but are referred to as “correspondence” in structures and processes between fields (Bourdieu, 1988). External sources of influence are always mediated through the structure, logic and dynamic internal to the field (Swartz, 1997). The extent to which positions and practices that can be explained by the logic of the field varies according to the autonomy of the field. In this respect, we assess to what extent social media add to the journalistic and the political field (cf. autonomy) or to what extent do both elites (and their respective practices) dominate social media (cf. dependency).

Alike Bourdieu’s field theory, mediatization understands media influence as a non-linear and reciprocal process, in which cause and consequence are difficult to disentangle. As noted by Schulz (2004, p. 90), “*mediatization as a concept both transcends and includes media effects*”. Or as Hepp (2010, p. 41) argues, media are “moulding forces” which can exert a certain “pressure” on the way we communicate. Concerning media’s influence on politics in particular, dependency is conceptualized as consisting of different phases (Asp, 2014) or dimensions (Strömbäck, 2008). In short, mediatization is a gradual process which evolves towards the growing adaption of the political logic to the media logic. This process coincides with the growing power of media. However, as Asp (2014) argues, dependency goes in both directions. Politicians are dependent on media for publicity, but media are equally dependent on politicians for information. Further, politicians might want to adapt to the logic of mass media in order to reach voters and retrieve coverage. In short, adaption is in accordance with their strategic goals (Esser, 2013; Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999; Meyer, 2002; Asp, 2014). Last, the process of mediatization is dynamic, as it interacts with political actors (e.g. high

profile versus low profile) and the political news culture (e.g. liberal versus democratic corporatist models of media and politics) (Strömbäck, 2008).

Since we understand social media as a separate field, we argue for a conceptual distinction between the logic of mass media and social media. Below, we present our comparative framework. In sub-section 2.1.4, we integrate the three fields under inquiry in this thesis and the systems framework of political communication.

### **2.1.3 Social media as a field, characterized by a distinct logic**

The outline of the logic of social media is built on the concept of *news media logic* (Esser, 2013). The concept of news media logic, or media logic more in general, emerged in the context of mass media (Altheide & Snow, 1979). In this respect, the advent of new media generates tensions and calls into question the relevance and feasibility of the conception of one media logic (Couldry, 2012; Krotz, 2014; Lundby, 2009). The concept of news media logic consists of three dimensions: a professional, a commercial and a technological dimension. The first dimension reflects journalistic news production and distribution, the second dimension reflects news organizations' commercial imperatives and the third dimension reflects the technological affordances of newspapers, radio or television.

To date, mediatization scholars have tried to expand as well as integrate the changing media environment in the existing framework. Further, new media are predominantly defined in their technological aspects and affordances. Mazzoleni (2014, p. 54, [quotation marks in original]) coins "mediatization 2.0" as an expansion of "traditional" mediatization, as it incorporates the "new media environment". Whereas Mazzoleni acknowledges new media challenge the existing framework, no clear conceptual framework is put forth. Further, Esser (2013, p. 173) makes reference to a "*new interactive online logic*". He integrates this interactive online logic in the concept of news media logic, arguing it is an extension of its technological dimension. In addition to print, television or radio, Esser (2013) integrates online media. In a similar manner, Finneman (2014, p. 298) defines "*digital materials and genres*", making reference to indigenous digital features as hypertext and navigation and search facilities such as the search engine. Further, Schulz (2014, p. 58) provides a more extensive overview of "*new media capabilities*" or affordances to advance political communication such as interactivity, time-shifting and mashing-up messages. In short, the focus lies on the technological dimensions of new media.

In this thesis, we do not only wish to account for the technological differences between mass media and social media, but equally account for the different socio-

cultural and commercial aspects of social and mass media. In particular, we translate the three dimensions of news media logic (Esser, 2013) to social media, with a focus on political communication. In doing so, we build on social media scholars' conceptualizations of the logic of social media (Klinger & Svensson, 2014; van Dijck & Poell, 2014). Their work is not (yet) integrated in the literature on mediatization. However, they provide a valuable add-on to the existing framework, in the light of the changing media landscape. Whereas Klinger and Svensson (2014) use to label “network media logic” to discuss the workings of social media, we adopt van Dijck and Poell's (2014) label “social media logic”, as it is more specific. In particular, we refer to the social media platforms Twitter and Facebook which are empirically studied in this thesis.

Below, we outline our comparative framework along the three dimensions of news media logic; that is, professional, commercial and technological (Esser, 2013). In accordance, we provide three tables (Tables 2 to 4), accompanied by an explanation. We acknowledge that in reality the three different dimensions of (social) media logic are interlinked. In addition, we acknowledge the “hybridity” of contemporary media systems (Chadwick, 2013) but argue it is fruitful to make an analytical distinction between mass media and social media logic.

Table 2 A comparative framework of news media logic and social media logic: The professional/socio-cultural dimension

	<b>News media logic</b>	<b>Social media logic</b>
<b>Professional/ Socio- cultural dimension</b>	Journalistic production and distribution: - Editorial autonomy - News selection: news values - News as a product - Presentation: objective, neutral - Public service - Journalists as gatekeepers	Networked production and distribution: - Networked individual autonomy - Self-selection: personal relevance - News as a process - Presentation: subjective, affective - Personal/private oriented - Secondary gatekeeping via sharing

Whereas the concept of news media logic is linked to professional journalists, social media logic is not linked to a specific profession. For the sake of comparison, we extended the professional dimension to “socio-cultural” (see Table 2). The first dimension discusses the norms and values of mass news media and social media concerning the production and distribution of content.

Esser (2013) follows Hallin and Mancini (2004) to define the professional dimension of news media logic. It reflects autonomy from outside influences (e.g. politics), distinct professional norms (e.g. source protection, objectivity and neutrality) and service of the

public interest (i.e. the duty to inform citizens and contribute to opinion formation and enlightenment of the public). Professional reporting is reflected in the selection of events, based on news values (cf. Galtung & Ruge, 1965) and the media’s gatekeeping and agenda-setting function (cf. McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Esser adds “critical scrutiny” (2013, p. 169) as an ideal, as media aim to act as a critical watchdog, holding politicians to account.

On social media, users autonomously select what to read (from whom) and what to share (with whom). In this respect, selection is guided by personal relevance rather than journalistic news values (Klinger & Svensson, 2014). Content itself is not a fixed product, but reflects a process. Deuze (2006) uses the terms “bricolage” and “remediation” to refer to the modification and manipulation of content in a variety of ways such as the online discussion of news content using humour (e.g. via memes). These activities create new insights and meanings of existing content. Storytelling on social media does not take the form of neutral and objective reporting. Papacharissi (2014; 2012) talks about affective online publics, making reference to alternative ways of content production and distribution. In particular, she argues hashtags or retweets construct publics and coordinate the flow of information and communication (also referred to as “structures of feeling”, 2014, p.133). The public debate mixes with everyday sociability, hence, the private and the public collapse. Further, it is users’ collective endeavour that determines how information flows and what is considered valuable. In short, this is labelled “secondary gatekeeping” (Singer, 2014). News becomes a shared experience, whereby social media users determine what is relevant for them and the users they are connected to.

Social media users’ personal choices are co-defined by the platform, and in particular its techno-economic dimensions. In Table 3 below, we discuss social media as commercial entities, in comparison with conventional news organizations’ commercial aspects.

Table 3 A comparative framework of news media logic and social media logic: The commercial dimension

	<b>News media logic</b>	<b>Social media logic</b>
<b>Commercial dimension</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Content industry</li> <li>- Commodification of media content: tabloidization</li> <li>- Audience attraction: Towards larger audiences</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Platform industry</li> <li>- Commodification of personal data: profile and behavioural data</li> <li>- Commodification of user interactions: Towards more connectivity</li> </ul>

News media organizations provide content, whereas social media provide the technological platforms via which content is distributed. Related, news media

commercialize the content they produce, whereas social media commercialize users' content. The commercialization of news reflects the dominance of economic, profit-related motivations over public service in the production of content (Dahlgren, 2005; Phillips & Witschge, 2012). News as a product is aimed at maximizing audience reach at minimum cost. It shows in the story telling and framing of news content (e.g. dramatization or tabloidization) (Esser, 1999; Mazzoleni, 1987).

Understanding social media as economic entities fits within a critical, political economic perspective on social media (Fenton, 2012; Fuchs, 2014; Helmond, 2015; van Dijck, 2014). In particular, van Dijck and Poell's (2013) outline of social media logic places great emphasis on social media as economic entities. In Table 3 we distinguish between the commodification of user data and user interactions. Concerning the former, we acknowledge that all activities social media users execute, are catalogued, processed and sold for targeted messages (van Dijck, 2014). Further, we acknowledge that user interactions with content or other users are in part self-selected and in part co-defined by the platforms (van Dijck, 2013). Via personalized recommendations, social media users are advised to read particular content or to follow particular users. These recommendations are not value free, in the sense that they push users towards more interactivity. Recommendations are algorithms that learn from earlier behaviour to guide future behaviour. If particular types of content (e.g. humorous, emotional or visual) have shown to instigate interaction (via shares, likes or retweets), it is likely that recommendations prioritize these message over others, making popular content even more popular (Baym, 2013).

In Table 4, we present the third and final dimension of social media logic; that is, the technological dimension.

Table 4 A comparative framework of news media logic and social media logic: The technological dimension

	<b>News media logic</b>	<b>Social media logic</b>
<b>Technological dimension</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- One-to-many communication: broadcasting/press</li> <li>- Mono-media content (e.g. visual or textual)</li> <li>- Linear content distribution</li> <li>- Invisible, mass media audiences</li> <li>- Fixed production routines: e.g. news bulletins</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Differentiated communication: e.g. one-to-one or few-to-many</li> <li>- Multi-media content: visual and (hyper)textual</li> <li>- Algorithmic content distribution</li> <li>- Explicit, fragmented audiences</li> <li>- Continuous production: instant action and reaction</li> </ul>

Compared to mass media, which operate from a broadcasting logic, social media allow for a variety of ways to communicate, e.g. many-to-many, one-to-one (or

narrowcasting) or one-to-many (or broadcasting). Further, mass media are predominantly mono-medial, as for example TV broadcasting is visual and newspapers are textual (although we do acknowledge their online counterparts are more multi-medial). Social media content is “modular” (Manovich, 2001) in the sense that it allows for multiple compositions of different elements, such as images, text, hyperlinks or other.

Whereas mass media content is brought to us in a linear fashion, the flow of information and communication on social media is cyclical and curated via algorithms. Facebook governs what is presented in users’ newsfeed via algorithms (Bucher, 2012). In addition, Twitter’s trending topics are algorithmically determined rankings of what is popular on the micro-blogging site. Algorithms are grounded in the datafication of our behaviour, which refers to the large-scale quantification and tracking of our online behaviour (e.g. the number of shares, friends, followers or retweets) (van Dijck & Poell, 2013). Further, these metrics are visible on the platform’s interface. Friends, followers or retweets can be counted and compared. As such, audiences’ behaviour becomes very explicit.

Compared to mass media audiences, which are invisible and dispersed, social media messages are addressed to a network of users that is explicit and visible (Schmidt, 2014). Examples are aggregated audience metrics (such as shares, likes or retweets). Further, citizens can address politicians and journalists directly and publically, e.g. through the use of @reply messages on Twitter. In turn, citizens make themselves visible, as their usernames are clickable and direct to their online profiles.

Last, social media content is produced continuously. In other words, updating becomes “emphasized behaviour” on social media (Klinger & Svensson, 2014). Related, Hermida (2010) describes Twitter as an “awareness system”, as it allows instant dissemination of information via the mobile and always-on technologies we carry. Simultaneously, it stands for the continuous visibility of politicians (and other actors in power) and related, the potential to scrutinize them (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2014).

#### **2.1.4 Social media logic as a theory of social media influence**

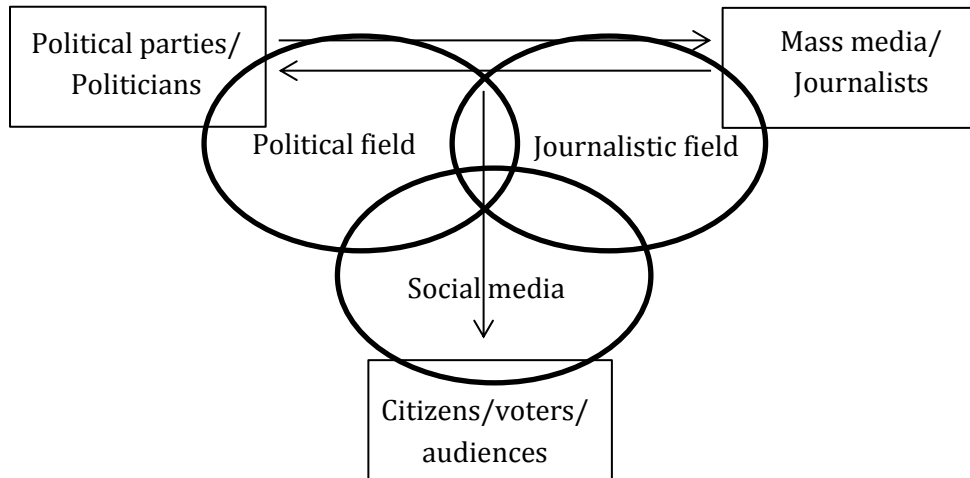
The purpose of our conceptual framework is not only to describe social media but to provide an analytical framework that allows assessing the impact of social media on political communication. In order to understand to what extent social media influence the workings of political and mass media institutions, we revise how media influence is understood within the mediatization framework (Strömbäck & Esser, 2014b). First, media influence is *structural* rather than individual as news media logic influences the

workings of institutions such as politics. Second, media influence is *indirect* in the sense that politicians adapt to the logic of news media, anticipating “what works” to get media coverage. Third, anticipation can be *instrumental* as well, which means it allows politicians to achieve strategic goals (Strömbäck & Van Aelst, 2013). This implies that politicians are *aware* of the workings of news media and engage in strategies and tactics in order to use the media for their own benefit (e.g. image building during elections). In turn, this serves as “*an expression of the increasing influence of news media and news media logic*” (Strömbäck & Esser, 2014b, p. 386).

With respect to social media, we equally argue that media influence is structural and indirect as well as instrumental. Social media logic does not equal social media influence, as it is the perceived need to use social media and the understanding of their workings that define the influence of social media. In short, influence is indirect and can be instrumental. Further, we do not only assess the impact of social media on politics, but equally assess how social media influence (and are influenced by) mass news media. Bourdieu (1993) uses the metaphor of “refraction” to define how fields refract external influences (i.e. external logics) through their own logics. This metaphor emphasizes the indirect influence of external logics.

In Figure 4 we bring together the systems framework of political communication and the field approach towards politics, mass media and social media. The overlap between the political and journalistic field and social media, as a field, visually represents the impact of social media on politics and mass media and vice versa. More specifically, we point to the impact of social media on (1) the relation between politics and mass media and (2) both politics and mass media’s relation with citizens. Concerning the latter, we combine political and media actors’ perspective with citizen actors’ perspective. In sum, the impact of social media refers to their potential to reconfigure the triangular relation among political, media and citizen actors (outlined in section 1.2 as the aim of this thesis).

Figure 4 The integration of the systems framework of political communication and the political field, the journalistic field and social media, as a field



## 2.2 Methodological design

The second section of this chapter presents a critical assessment of social media data for social-scientific research and the study of political communication in particular. In all the studies included in this thesis, we make use of social media data. A detailed discussion of the different designs in which social media data were embedded, can be found in the papers (see Chapter 3). In the concluding part of this section (i.e. 2.2.4), we elaborate on the efforts made in this thesis to empirically assess the meaning and value of social media data for social-scientific research. First, we discuss the broader debate on the emerging field of social media research. Current discussions revolve around ethical, legal and political issues with respect to data access, the validity and reliability of social media data, methodological innovation and skills. We particularly focus on Twitter and Facebook in the light of the empirical work conducted in this thesis.

### 2.2.1 The politics of social media data collection

Research on social media first and foremost takes social media as an object of research, aiming to understand the use, causes and consequences of social media in relation to a variety of (non-) communicative activities. Second, and equally important, social media are methods as we use social media data to study social media. Understanding social media as a research method is a prerequisite to understand social media as an object of research.



The use of social media as a method fits within the broader category of “digital methods”. More specifically, Rogers (2013) distinguishes *natively digital* methods, such as search engine results, from *digitized* methods such as online surveys. Further, he argues that research on culture and society can be grounded in online dynamics, employing the term “online groundedness”. Whereas we embrace social media as a research method, we argue that these platforms shape the knowledge we produce from them. Hence, we differ from Rogers in our epistemic approach and follow Jungherr’s (2015) mediation hypothesis, stating that reality is mediated through social media. We acknowledge social media are non-neutral transmitters of communication and information, as conceptualized via the *logic* of social media. In extension, this counts for their use as tools for research as well, or as Vis (2013) points out, data are not just “out there”.

Social media research is still emerging, at least compared to surveys or in-depth interviews. This is related to the relative novelty of these platforms (as Twitter was created in 2006 and Facebook in 2004). Data collection of Twitter and Facebook is controlled via APIs, serving as gateways.<sup>1</sup> The API, or Application Programming Interface, allows developers to gain access to the sites’ data and build applications that are available to social media users. In other words, APIs first and foremost serve social media companies to valorise user behaviour and connect to the wider web (e.g. via plugins on news websites).

Within social sciences, scholars have critically assessed the use of APIs for scientific research (Burgess & Bruns, 2012; Driscoll & Walker, 2014; Lomborg & Bechmann, 2014; Tufekci, 2014a; Vis, 2013). Nonetheless, literature on APIs is limited, especially in contrast to the number of studies that use social media data.

Comparing Facebook and Twitter, we find a lot of research on Twitter and the political debate (Bruns & Highfield, 2013; see Jungherr, 2014b for an extensive overview; Vaccari & Valeriani, 2013), whereas Facebook is somewhat less documented (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013; Klinger, 2014; Larsson & Ihlen, 2015; Ross & Bürger, 2014). In addition to the public nature of the platform, we can equally argue that, compared to Facebook, Twitter has a different “cultural status”; that is, as a news medium (e.g. Hermida, 2010). In addition and equally important, it allows easy topic searches, via hashtags or keywords (which is less the case on Facebook).

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to Twitter and Facebook, many other platforms have APIs (e.g. Flickr, YouTube and Instagram). The ProgrammableWeb (<http://www.programmableweb.com/>) keeps track of the available APIs and follows their major evolutions.

Twitter offers two different public APIs, REST APIs and streaming APIs.<sup>2</sup> The former allow retrieving user descriptives (such as friends and followers), searching tweets (using hashtags, URLs or keywords) no more than a week back or retrieving 3200 of a user's most recent tweets. Streaming APIs allow for real-time capturing of Twitter messages, either keyword or user-based. The API documentation details the limitations that apply for every call that can be made. Further, both public APIs do not grant full and unlimited access to Twitter's internal data storage, although it is not clear what we are missing. González-Bailón and colleagues (2012) show the differences in datasets retrieved via REST and streaming APIs, and Driscoll and Walker (2014) show differences between the streaming API and Twitter's authorized reseller of Twitter data, Gnip. The latter provides greater volumes of data, be it at considerable monetary cost. Unfortunately, these comparative studies are very uncommon, but they do show limited transparency and consistency, which is particularly problematic for the reliability of the findings we retrieve from social media data.

For this thesis, we predominantly relied on the open source Twitter archiving tool *yourTwapperkeeper* to collect data (Bruns & Burgess, 2012). It draws from Twitter's streaming and REST APIs to archive tweets that contain a particular hashtag or keyword on a server hosted by the researcher. Its ease of use and ability to export data to Microsoft Excel (and other formats) makes it a popular tool amongst researchers. *yourTwapperkeeper* datasets contain Twitter messages and a limited number of meta data such as the user (and user id), the time the tweet was created, the language code, geographical information, the client software used (e.g. Tweetdeck) and the recipient (in case of an @reply). There are many other data collection tools available, some of which require little programming knowledge (e.g. NodeXL or TAGS, and the paid-for tool Discovertext to name only a few), whereas others require more programming knowledge (such as the R packages as *TwitterR* or *SocialMediaMineR*). Most of the tools make use of REST APIs, for which continuous connection with an external server is not needed. In other words, these tools go back in time (no more than a week), but do not allow real-time data collection as is the case with *yourTwapperkeeper*. Further, most Twitter tools focus on the collection of messages, whereas for example the collection of user data (such as one's network of friends and followers) is rare. Overall, tools come and go over time as developers and/or APIs change course.

Concerning Facebook data collection, we relied on two tools; that is, *Netvizz* and *Digital Footprints*. Both tools build on Facebook's graph API. *Netvizz* is a Facebook app, created by Bernhard Rieder, who is part of the Digital Methods Initiative (DMI) in

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<sup>2</sup> <https://dev.twitter.com/overview/documentation>

Amsterdam.<sup>3</sup> Alike the Twitter tools, Netvizz has been subject to changes due to alterations in the API.<sup>4</sup> In this thesis, we used Netvizz to capture posts and comments on politicians' public pages in the light of the 2014 elections. In contrast to Twitter, data access is not limited in time, hence, collection can occur long after events took place. Alike Twitter, data export to Microsoft Excel is possible. Datasets are rather comparable as well. They contain politicians' posts, the time they were published, etc., except that the senders of the posts and the users commenting the posts are anonymized.

Since some politicians used their personal profiles for election campaigning, we were obliged to use an additional data collection tool. Netvizz does not require informed consent from the user, therefore, only public pages can be collected. The second tool we used is called Digital Footprints and allows to collect user data based on explicit consent.<sup>5</sup> The application is initiated by Anja Bechmann and created in Denmark. Alike Twitter, we are not entirely sure we are getting all the data we ask for. On the Digital Footprints website, a "Yes and No" is the answer to the question on data completeness when using Digital Footprints as a collection tool. More specifically, unclear technical limitations and users' privacy settings prevent full access.

In sum, we depend on individual users' settings and social media companies' willingness to open up their databases. The tools we rely on are fickle as most of them already changed since we collected data in 2012 and 2014. More so, it is more likely we evolve towards limited access rather than the other way around. The volatile nature of social media makes it very difficult to compare research over time (Vis, 2013). It requires continuous reflexivity and transparent documentation on procedures that guide our methodological choices.

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<sup>3</sup> The DMI is an interesting and well-established research group in the field of online research. It predominantly takes a humanities perspective on the usage and the study of the web to understand culture and society (<https://wiki.digitalmethods.net/Dmi/WebHome>).

<sup>4</sup> Bernhard Rieder (2015) wrote a blog post labelled "The end of Netvizz(?)", explaining how the API changed and how that affected Netvizz. Further, he (rightfully) expresses his concern as to what extent the API will remain accessible for external Facebook research in the future.

<sup>5</sup> The application has its own website (<http://www.digitalfootprints.dk/>) where you can apply for access and log on to export your data. Further, it contains a tutorial, documentation and FAQ.

## 2.2.2 The ethics of social media data collection

The use of social media data for research comes with ethical challenges. We point to two interesting documents here that served as a guide for our empirical work; the AoIR<sup>6</sup> recommendations for ethical decision making (Markham & Buchanan, 2012) and the COSMOS<sup>7</sup> ethics statement (Williams et al., 2013).

For the most part, our data fits in the “low risk” category (Williams et al., 2013), meaning that we are dealing with tweets/Facebook posts from official accounts/users in official positions. However, concerning Facebook in particular, not all politicians were eager to provide us access to their personal Facebook profiles. To some, universities appear more threatening than the multi-billion dollar company Facebook. For Twitter, politicians uttered no concerns. Our small sample study on politicians’ use of Twitter and Facebook ( $N= 19$ , see Study III) makes it feasible to ask politicians for explicit consent. However, for studies that rely on larger datasets, this is not possible. The large-scale Twitter studies included in this thesis do not rely on informed consent from the user. However, we not explicitly refer to individual users in our papers. All users were coded as political, media or citizen actors and these aggregated labels were used in the papers (see Studies I and II).

Study V included in this thesis relies on interviews with tweeting viewers ( $N= 12$ ), in combination with a content and network analysis of their Twitter messages. The interviews mainly focused on viewers’ use of Twitter to discuss televised political debates, but also included a set of questions on the use of their data for scientific research, situated around the “public/private” and “data/persons” dichotomies as discussed in the AoIR ethical guide (Markham & Buchanan, 2012). These insights are not integrated in Study V, but they are integrated in a paper presented at the 2013 AoIR Conference in Denver (D’heer, Verdegem, & Courtois, 2013). We found that researchers are not amongst users’ “imagined audience” (Marwick & boyd, 2011) on Twitter. However, users are aware of the public nature of their utterances. More so, they felt quite confident about the presentation of their messages and even their usernames in academic papers. We acknowledge these findings are hard to generalize, as our interviewees were selected in relation to the TV program under inquiry (i.e. ‘De Zevende Dag’) and were amongst the most active users tweeting about the program.

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<sup>6</sup> AoIR or the Association of Internet Researchers has an on-going commitment to ensuring that research on and about the internet is conducted in an ethical manner by offering ethics guidance to researchers.

<sup>7</sup> COSMOS or the Collaborate Online Social Media Observatory puts great emphasis on the ethical impact of big social data and the development of new methodological tools (in particular for UK academic and public sectors).

A recent survey by COSMOS (2013-15) showed the majority of social media users (i.e. 80%) is not or only slightly concerned about the use of social media data by universities (compared to commercial or governmental organizations) (Williams, 2015). However, only about 50% agrees or tends to agree with the idea that researchers would use their tweets as data without consent. In particular, some types of users were less likely to be concerned, such as students or alleged “online experts”. This resonates with our insights based on a small collection of avid Twitter users. To conclude, empirical research gauging users’ ethical considerations will (hopefully) become an established part of the field of social media research.

Below, we continue with the discussion of the analytical approaches that characterize social media research (and Twitter and Facebook in particular), which inevitably build on what the APIs provide us and how they do so.

### **2.2.3 The imperialism of numbers, text and networks in social media analytics**

Generally speaking, social media research is dominated by quantitative work, following the extraction of large datasets on social media use (Lomborg & Bechmann, 2014). However, social media data is not necessarily quantitative or qualitative. As Lewis, Zamith and Hermida (2013, p. 48) state “*big data is often composed of small data*”. For example, Twitter datasets may be large, but Twitter messages are “small”, highly individual utterances, coming from a variety of different users, situated in a variety of different contexts, expressed for different purposes or audiences in mind.

Below, we critically review the dominant analytical approaches to social media data. We do not dismiss the value of quantitative work (as it is conducted in this thesis as well), but argue for reflexivity and variety in analytical approaches.

#### **The limitations of counts and rankings**

Whereas numbers reduce the complexity of the world, there are also other ways to capture reality besides quantification. Social media scholars have argued not everything can be quantified and there are things the data “do not see”, such as socio-demographics of users or their engagement with content beyond likes and shares (Baym, 2013; boyd & Crawford, 2012; Vis, 2013). As Morozov (2013) further argues, there is no positive relation between the available amount of data and the knowledge we can retrieve.

Further, numbers have the aura of objectivity and neutrality. Social media metrics such as likes are easily captured, but far more difficult to interpret. As Baym (2013)

argues, the number of likes particular Facebook posts receive, is contingent upon to the way Facebook algorithmically structures messages. More specifically, Facebook's news feed algorithm, called EdgeRank, prioritizes particular messages over others (Bucher, 2012). As a result, a lot of content remains invisible for most users. More so, it comes from a non-representative sample of users and there are substantial inequalities in participation between users (Baym, 2013; Shirky, 2008).

In short, the numbers do not necessarily speak for themselves (boyd & Crawford, 2012). When we account for the algorithmic nature by which messages are presented to users, the relative importance of popularity metrics as likes is hard to interpret. Can we assume that if a post gets 10 likes, it is twice as popular as a post with 5 likes? Probably not.

### **The contingencies of textual analysis**

Vis (2013) argues images and other visual material are hardly studied, although they make up an important part of the content produced and shared on social media. Images do not lend themselves to analyses that are applicable to textual data, such as text mining (or even conventional content analysis). More so, the API provides us with databases that are solely made up of textual elements, as pictures included in Twitter messages or Facebook posts are represented in the dataset as hyperlinks.

The increase in textual data challenges researchers up to the point traditional methods are no longer sufficient. Computational methods can be useful for "surface-level analysis", such as the coding of tweets as retweets or the extraction of @mentions in Twitter messages (Lewis, Zamith, & Hermida, 2013). Subsequently, message content can be coded by human coders, as Lewis et al. (2013) argue the brevity and the tone of social media messages (and Twitter messages in particular) requires contextual understanding and interpretation. To date, communication scholars generally lean towards the manual analysis of Twitter and Facebook messages of politicians and/or journalists (Graham, Broersma, & Hazelhoff, 2013; Grant, Moon, & Grant, 2010; Klinger, 2014; Mourão, 2014), as is the case in this thesis as well.

Whereas computational methods, such as machine learning will (and should) gain in importance, they require extensive and specific validation (Grimmer & Stewart, 2013). First, there are differences between the social media platforms. Automatic content analysis of Twitter messages (of 140 characters) is very different from (and probably more challenging than) Facebook posts. Second, sentiment (and sarcasm or irony in particular) are very difficult to judge for computers and in extension, for humans as well (e.g. González-Ibáñez, Muresan, & Wacholder, 2011). Third, communication scholars are not necessarily familiar with the workings of sentiment analysis and related approaches.

Within the field of computational social sciences and linguistics, we did find studies that use automated sentiment analysis on Twitter data to predict election results (e.g. Jungherr, Jürgens, & Schoen, 2012; O'Connor, Balasubramanyan, Routledge, & Smith, 2010; Sang & Bos, 2012; Tumasjan, Sprenger, Sandner, & Welpe, 2010). The results are mixed, but argue in favour of a positive relation between Twitter traffic and election results. However, in an attempt to replicate some of the findings, Gayo-Avello and colleagues (2011) did not succeed. As they further argue: *“the problem is that, in the past, some researchers have felt comfortable treating social media as a black box: It may give you the right answer, even though you may not know why”* (2011, p. 490).

### **The network-ification of social media data**

In addition to the dominance of textual analyses, network analytical approaches are very popular as well, especially for Twitter data (e.g. Ausserhofer & Maireder, 2013; Bruns & Burgess, 2012). Network analysis is deemed highly valuable for the visualization of interaction patterns between users. As boyd & Crawford (2012, p. 670, [quotation marks in original]) state: *“The rise of social network sites prompted an industry-driven obsession with the ‘social graph’. Thousands of researchers have flocked to Twitter and Facebook and other social media to analyse connections between messages and accounts, making claims about social networks.”* Following boyd and Crawford (2012), we argue that the appropriation of social network analysis (SNA) on social media data requires accounting for the specificities of the platform when interpreting the findings.

SNA is a methodological approach rooted in sociology and strongly integrated with statistics and mathematics (Prell, 2012). Social networks are commonly defined as a social structure, which consists of nodes (e.g. Twitter users) and ties (i.e. connections between those nodes). Connections can be various (e.g. friendship), but concerning social media the focus lies on communication, whereby tie strength is defined quantitatively (i.e. the frequency of interactions).

SNA studies predominantly discuss Twitter, whereas for Facebook, content analysis is more common (e.g. Enli & Skogerbø, 2013; Larsson, 2015; Ross & Bürger, 2014). Twitter is a public platform, hence, connections between users are visible and accessible via the APIs. This is not the case for Facebook. Also in this thesis, SNA is applied on Twitter data. Further, Twitter research shows a bias towards the study of *micro* layer communication patterns (Bruns & Moe, 2014); that is, communication between users via @replies and @mentions. The *meso* layer (Bruns & Moe, 2014), reflecting users' network of friends and/or followers, is understudied. The lack of scholarly attention is partly related to the

APIs, which make it more difficult to obtain user profile information compared to user behaviour.<sup>8</sup> As previously mentioned, most of the Twitter data collection tools focus on the collection of messages rather than user descriptives (such as followers, friends and profile information).

Whereas SNA terminology is quite easily adopted by social media scholars, its formal mathematical procedures are not. SNA requires a specific set of technical and mathematical skills, which are not common among communication scholars. Further, the question remains as to what extent these formal procedures can be applied to online data. SNA traditionally works with smaller, well-defined offline networks, combining communication flows with more stable relations such as friendship. In this respect, basic SNA principles as “transitivity” (or: a friend of my friend is also my friend) are very difficult to translate to social media networks, especially behavioural networks (boyd & Crawford, 2012). However, it is precisely these communication networks that are easily retrieved. SNA expertise and “domain expertise” are important to understand the limitations and possibilities of social media data for SNA (Vis, 2013). The construction of the networks and the interpretation of the relations is related to the socio-technical characteristics of the social media platform under inquiry.

There are quite some SNA tools available, depending on the data or analytical requirements (e.g. UCINET, Pajek, Siena, the R package Statnet to name only a few). For the studies in this thesis, we rely on the SNA software UCINET (Borgatti, Everett, & Freeman, 2002). In comparison to the visualization software Gephi, UCINET allows to test for statistical significance, accounting for the interdependencies of the measures. In addition, UCINET provides an interface, online documentation and has an established position within the field of SNA (Prell, 2012).

To conclude, we acknowledge the data volumes accessible via the API lean towards the application of quantitative, text-based and network-based approaches. Whereas the methods might be established (e.g. SNA and content analysis), their application on social media data is still emerging. Below, we present the empirical efforts made in this thesis to contribute to the use of social media as a scientific method.

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<sup>8</sup> As previously mentioned, Twitter tools mainly focus on the collection of Twitter messages based on hashtags, keywords or tweets retrieved from users’ timelines. Further, the collection of user data (such as friends and followers) is more cumbersome and restricted compared to Twitter messages (<https://dev.twitter.com/rest/reference/get/followers/ids>).



## 2.2.4 The empirical assessment of social media as a scientific method

Following the critical assessment of the use of social media data for scientific research, we present the empirical efforts made in this thesis to enrich and validate behavioural data retrieved via social media. We pay specific attention to the hashtag, a popular Twitter data sampling method used in four out of the five studies included in this thesis.

### Combining the online and the offline to enrich the findings

Following Welser, Smith, Fisher and Gleave (2008), we argue for a multi-layered approach towards the study of online behaviour. These authors distinguish a *structural* description, a *thin* description and a *thick* description of online behaviour. All three levels are valuable as such, but their combination allows for a richer understanding. Applied on social media, the first layer reflects relational data on user interactions and provides insight in the structural arrangement of interaction patterns. Second, the thin description of the data entails a content analysis of social media messages. Since interpretation and meaning cannot be derived from behavioural data, a thick description; that is, offline contextualization, adds to the two first layers.

All studies in this thesis combined, we cover the three layers outlined by Welser and colleagues (2008). The *structural* understanding of political, media and citizen actors' online behaviour is most prominent in Studies I and II. These studies map the respective actors' positions and communicative practices in the Twitter election debates of 2012 and 2014. The correspondence in both studies' analytical approach contributes to the reliability of the findings.

With respect to the content of the messages, or the *thin description*, we analysed politicians' Twitter and Facebook messages (in Study III) and tweeting viewers' Twitter messages (in Study V). In both studies, the data samples were quite large, i.e. over 1000 messages. However, we acknowledge these are coming from a selected set of users (i.e. 19 politicians in Study III and 12 tweeting viewers in Study V). As previously mentioned, social media data are not necessarily quantitative or qualitative which complicates the existing boundaries between quantitative and qualitative methods. This has resulted in studies that draw from big samples, but apply qualitative analyses (e.g. Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013), as well as small sample approaches that apply quantitative and mixed method approaches (e.g. Marwick & boyd, 2011; Stephansen & Couldry, 2014). In this thesis, content analyses of social media messages were applied in small sample studies and mainly served to support and enrich the interview data.

Last, we rely on in-depth interviews with a selection of politicians in Study III, with journalists in Study IV and with tweeting viewers in Study V. The interviews provide *thick descriptions* and are used in combination with a content and/or network analysis of social media messages.

### **Combining the online and the offline to validate the findings**

The combination of different methods not only serves to enrich, but also allows to validate social media data (Tufekci, 2014a). There is one study in particular in this thesis that takes a methodological approach; that is, Study V. Study V discusses tweeting viewers' interpretations of televised political debates. In particular, we define two validity issues related to social media data: (1) the mediated nature of human behaviour and (2) the technological bias we are exposed to as researchers. We assess these issues, relying on the confrontation of social media behaviour with the singularities of human interpretation.

First, we acknowledge social media data are not objective as such, but are unbiased data about user behaviour *in relation to the communication channel under investigation* (Jürgens, 2014). The interpretation of tweeting viewers' online utterances is challenging due to the brevity of the messages and their public nature. Based on the interviews, we acknowledge the performative nature of Twitter users' messages, making them very different from people's offline meanings, interpretations and conversations. The act of tweeting in itself as well as the style and formulation of the messages dominate over the delivery of information.

Second, large-scale Twitter analyses are often based on digital objects, such as hashtags, mentions and replies. Although this facilitates the comparison between different studies and eliminates researcher bias (Jürgens, 2014), it exposes us to a *technological bias*. The technical function of digital objects does not always match its appropriation by the users. For this study, we particularly point to the use and meaning of the @-sign and the hashtag. The latter is essentially a means to collect and store data, but it does not indicate a collective entity of users per se. Bruns and Moe (2014, p. 18) state that if users include topical hashtags in their own tweets, but do not follow other users' hashtagged tweets, "*the primary utility of hashtagging would be negated*". Indeed, our study shows that users do not follow the dedicated hashtag (here: '#7dag') when tweeting about television. Further, @-signs are both conversational and referential, depending on their positioning in the messages and the actors mentioned (e.g. politicians, journalists or other viewers).

In brief, we acknowledge reduction is inevitable when we aim for large-scale patterns, but it does not exclude an interpretivist perspective on social media data and objects. The latter provides a valuable addition to the former.

## Twitter hashtag sampling under scrutiny

The Twitter hashtag is an easy and popular method for researchers to capture data (e.g. Highfield, Harrington, & Bruns, 2013; Larsson & Moe, 2012). Also in this thesis, four out of five studies rely on the hashtag for data sampling. Hashtag samples are used to construct communication networks between users. However, “*we may significantly underestimate the full volume of @replies which was prompted by hashtagged tweets*” (Bruns & Stieglitz, 2014, p. 75). In other words, hashtag samples include hashtagged messages only, hence, follow-up messages that do not contain the hashtag are not included in the dataset. When we build conversation networks between users, we risk losing part of the conversation.

For one out of the four studies that rely on hashtag samples, we present a methodological inquiry, assessing what we miss in terms of follow-up messages (i.e. @replies).<sup>9</sup> More specifically, it concerns Study II, integrated in Chapter 3. Study II investigates the 2014 election debate on Twitter, assessing to what extent political, media and citizen actors interact. The methodological inquiry we present below was conducted in cooperation with computer scientists (working at the Data Science Lab at Ghent University). The construction of interdisciplinary teams is recognized as an emerging, but particularly relevant advancement in the field of social media research (or internet research) (Tufekci, 2014; Vis, 2013). With their cooperation, we were able to construct a dataset including both hashtagged tweets and non-hashtagged follow-up responses. Although this sounds rather straightforward, it is based on the automated use of different API calls and a restructuring of the default presentation of Twitter messages in the retrieved datasets. We briefly touch upon the findings below.

For the 2014 election debate on Twitter, we empirically analysed what we miss in terms of follow-up messages (i.e. @replies). We focus on a small sub-sample ( $N= 1719$ ) of all tweets collected in the light of the 2014 elections to investigate (1) how hashtagged replies differ from non-hashtagged replies and (2) how the conversation network changes when we include non-hashtagged responses.

First, the inclusion of the dedicated hashtag (i.e. #vk2014) in @replies co-occurs with the inclusion of additional interactive elements. In particular, a logistic regression showed that additional hashtags, the presence of hyperlinks and the length of the responses are significant, positive predictors of the inclusion of the dedicated election

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<sup>9</sup> This study resulted in a separate paper that was submitted to the online journal *First Monday* in 2015. This paper is not formally included in this thesis as it presents a methodological inquiry of the 2014 election debate on Twitter, which is discussed in Study II included in this thesis.

hashtag. Hence, there are structural differences between @replies that include or exclude the #vk(20)14 hashtag.

Second, the conversation network grows in size (both in terms of users and connections) when we include non-hashtagged responses. Hence, the findings confirm that we underestimate the number of follow-up messages prompted by hashtagged tweets. Further, network reciprocity increased, meaning there is more two-way interaction between users in the network when we include non-hashtagged responses. Since the network grew in size and new users are included, existing users' positions altered. Consequently, we coded and compared elites (i.e. politicians and mass media) and non-elites (i.e. citizens). The inclusion of non-hashtagged responses confirms the insights we receive from "hashtag only" studies on the political debate on Twitter, i.e. the popularity and dominance of elites in the network (see Studies I and II in Chapter 3).

In sum, our methodological discussion presented a number of reflections, challenges and potential approaches regarding the use of social media as a method. Overall, we argue for a "healthy tension" between enthusiasm for social media data and the possibilities offered on the one hand and scepticism with respect to their meaning and added value on the other hand.

## Chapter 3

### Included studies

*This chapter integrates five empirical studies. Each of the studies is preceded by a lead that explains its contribution in relation to the central aim of this thesis. The studies are not presented in a chronological manner. The first two studies discuss online behaviour of political, media and citizen actors combined. The following three studies take the perspective of the respective actors separately.*

### 3.1 Study I: The election debate on Twitter: Comparing political, media and citizen actors' positions and communicative practices (I)

**D'heer, E. & Verdegem, P. (2014). Conversations about the elections on Twitter: Towards a structural understanding of Twitter's relation with the political and the media field, *European Journal of Communication*, 29(6), 720-737.**

Study I provides a conceptual and empirical understanding of the Twitter debate on the 2012 local elections. We propose the conception of social media as a field that is separate from but interacts with the journalistic and the political field. We empirically assess to what extent Twitter allows for the inclusion of non-elite voices in the debate and the occurrence of two-way communication among politicians, journalists and citizens. Hence, we predominantly focus on the technological dimension of social media logic.

Based on a network analysis of user interactions, we find Twitter indeed allows for the inclusion of non-elites (i.e. citizens) in the conversation. However, central positions within the network are occupied by elites (i.e. political and media actors). Further, elite actors mainly receive attention from citizens, but do not return the favour.

In the concluding section of the paper, we allude to the shortcomings of the hashtag approach for data sampling (as is discussed extensively in the previous chapter). Further, we argue for follow-up research that enriches the structural communication patterns we found. In particular, Studies III to V add to the insights retrieved from this study.

#### 3.1.1 Introduction

Since the early 1990s, research has focused on the potential of the internet to reproduce or revert traditional hierarchies of power or influence, thereby indicating a transformation in form and repertoires for political communication (Lilleker & Vedel, 2013). Concerning social media in particular, these are associated with the inclusion of citizen actors in the political debate, which is traditionally dominated by "established authorities", like politicians and mass media. In this article, we focus on the use of Twitter during elections, characterized by intensified relations among politicians, mass media and citizen-voters through various media platforms (Howard, 2006). We focus on

this period of heightened activity to study Twitter conversation and the relative positions of political, media and citizen actors within the debate.

Internet research on campaigning and the elections is traditionally based on content analysis, whereas the network structure of the internet has been underused for a long time (Lilleker & Vedel, 2013). Over the last few years, the use of social media (notably Twitter) in political discussion has received considerable attention by scholars, in part related to the success of Obama's 2008 social media campaign. Hence, numerous studies focus on the activities of specific traditional political actors (politicians and parties) on the platform during election times (e.g. Bruns & Highfield, 2013; Graham et al., 2013; Vergeer et al., 2011). In addition, beyond politicians, we have studies that point to the role of journalists in the political debate (e.g. Bruns & Burgess, 2011; Larsson & Moe, 2012) and, to a minor extent; activities of citizen users are also included (e.g. Ausserhofer & Maireder, 2013). Through empirical inquiry, in which content analysis and also network analysis have their place, these studies contribute to the understanding of the role of Twitter in the public debate. There is a general consensus that virtual spheres mirror existing social structures – how established actors seem to dominate these digital arenas for political communication. Our question here is: How can we conceptualize and empirically investigate this in a systematic manner?

In order to engage with this question, we put forth an approach that is based on Bourdieu's field theory, which has been appropriated on the participatory web or web 2.0 (Song, 2010) and social network technologies in particular (Papacharissi & Easton, 2013). We introduce and adapt Bourdieu's tools for the current research question rather than a thorough elaboration upon its potential for media and communication research (see Benson & Neveu, 2005; Couldry, 2003). As we outline below in the theoretical framework, we appropriate the concepts of "field" and "autonomy" that Bourdieu (1988) uses to look for "*a resemblance within a difference*" (p. 178); that is, relatedness between the fields. We start from the assumption that positions and conversation practices of the actors on Twitter are related to the positions and practices of the actors in other fields, whereby we particularly focus on the political and the media field.

This article starts with a theoretical outline of the field approach to understand the role of social media in the public debate. In addition, we explain the Belgian case as well as the data we collected and the analyses we conducted. Following, we present the obtained findings, whereby we discuss conversation patterns between the actors in relation to their positions as political, media or citizen actors. The final section allows for overarching conclusions, limitations and opportunities for further research.

### **3.1.2 Theoretical framework**

#### **A social media logic and the notion of autonomy**

Although we focus on Twitter, with its socio-technological particularities, social media platforms as a collective are characterized by a network logic (Svensson, 2011) or social media logic (van Dijck & Poell, 2013). Without thorough elaboration, the notion of media logic acknowledges the way media shape politics and, in a broader sense, society. For this study, we particularly focus on the technological affordances of social media to influence social relations and communication, as well as the nature and function of the relations between political, media and citizen actors.

As mentioned above, the concept of logic, applied on mass media as well as social media, aims to understand the “*dependency of society on the media and their logic*” (Hjarvard, 2013, p. 17). In this respect, we can say that it looks inside-out (i.e. how media influence society). When we relate it to the concept of field, we use the concept of logic to look outside-in (i.e. to understand how external influences co-define the logic of these social media platforms). In this study, we focus on conversation patterns among politicians, media and citizens on Twitter. We acknowledge that these practices are both afforded by technology, but they also reflect the user’s resources and dispositions.

According to Benson (2009), the promises of the field approach are in the opportunities to describe and explain variations in media logic. These variations can be found through a systematic comparison with related fields and their logics. Our approach is distinct from celebratory interpretations suggesting egalitarian, non-linear and decentralized relations between the actors based on social media characteristics (Benkler, 2006; Gillmor, 2004; Heinrich, 2011). More specifically, Castells (2009) relates communicative autonomy (i.e. capacity of the new communication systems to communicate at large) with social and political autonomy of the user. Hereby, he ignores the collective dimension or the relative autonomy of the individual, as rightly addressed by Fenton and Barassi (2011). In this context, it is relevant to introduce Bourdieu’s notion of autonomy as related to the field concept (Bourdieu, 1984, 1990). Via this notion, we alter our scope from the autonomy of the individual (i.e. a micro perspective) to the autonomy of the field (i.e. a meso-level understanding). Compared to habitus and social capital, these concepts remained relatively undeveloped (Bourdieu, 1993), yet we find them promising in order to understand the structural characteristics of conversation patterns among political, media and citizen actors on Twitter. As outlined below, the concept of autonomy provides a systematic understanding of the relation between social media platforms (and their characteristics) and the political and the media field. Although we acknowledge its use goes beyond civic and political purposes, we focus on the political debate on Twitter.



## **Related fields and the notion of autonomy**

According to Bourdieu (1984, 1993), a field is an arena of social or cultural production that consists of agents (individuals, groups or institutions) that comprise positions within the field and are in a dynamic relation with one another. Of particular interest here is the notion of autonomy of the field or the way it generates and acts upon its own values or “logic” (i.e. heteronomy) or acts alike other fields (i.e. homology). Bourdieu uses the language of “homology” to explain the effects between the fields, which are never direct, but are referred to as “correspondence” in structures and processes between fields. Here, we focus on the relation between Twitter (as a field), the media field (or “journalistic field”, Benson & Neveu, 2005) and the political field (here: political parties and professional politicians) (Bourdieu, 1991). Twitter is understood as a field in the sense that it reflects an arena of social activity which has its own *modus operandi*, characteristics and structured positions. We acknowledge the study of the political and the media field is historically informed and well documented in the literature. Nonetheless, following Kauppi (2003, p. 778), no particular unit is excluded for field analysis. Below, we formulate and elaborate on our central research question:

*RQ: How do conversation patterns among political, media and citizen actors on Twitter reveal Twitter’s relatedness to the political and the media field?*

Answering this question allows us to understand the autonomy of Twitter from the political and the media field and its place in public debate in relation to those fields. In reference to Maton’s (2005) conceptual work on the notion of autonomy, we particularly focus on positional autonomy, which reflects the relation between the positions actors occupy on Twitter and their location in other fields (i.e. political or media). The position of the actors on Twitter (or any other field) reflects the distribution of relevant kinds of capital (or power) (Bourdieu, 1988). Bourdieu (1986) distinguishes economic capital (which is self-explanatory), cultural capital (i.e. education, social and professional experience) and social capital (i.e. a durable network of relations). More ambiguous in nature is the notion of symbolic capital, which is said to legitimate other forms of capital and overlap extensively with social capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Swartz, 1997). In essence, it can be understood as the legitimation (Bourdieu, 1986) or the recognition actors receive from the group (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 72), which is, at the end, at stake in any social field.

In this study, we focus on Twitter conversation practices as well as the positions the actors hold in the conversation network. Both practices and positions are empirically related to the positions the actors hold in the political and the media field, each with their own logic of practice. Concerning these conversation networks, we formulate how the affordances of social media can influence (1) politicians’ relation with citizens, as an electorate, and (2) media’s relation with citizens as an audience:

1. The presence and practices of formal political actors (politicians and parties) on Twitter allow interactivity and more direct forms of participation with citizens, who then become part of the political public field (Friedland, Hove, & Rojas, 2006). Networking technologies allow immediate, two-way channels of communication, un-mediated by mass media, which reflects more direct forms of politics or “politics of non-representation” (Fenton, 2012). In addition to the altering nature of the debate, it is also broadened by the inclusion of more voices to enter and join the discussion (Fenton, 2012).
2. The advent of social media is often related to the changing relationship between producers and consumers of content (Bruns, 2005; Jenkins, 2006). Otherwise stated, the broadcasting logic (of corporate media) meets the logic of convergence (or bottom-up participatory culture) (Sjöberg & Rydin, 2013). Concerning Twitter, Rieder (2012) puts forth the notion of “refraction”. Based on a study of Twitter messages, he acknowledges Twitter as a “refraction chamber”, as it alters existing traditional news and information flows (rather than being an independent space). The metaphor of refraction is used by Bourdieu (1993) as well; that is, the way the field “refracts” external influences. Via our conversation networks, we aim to understand how relations between citizens and media organizations or journalists on Twitter are structured.

The field concept allows us to understand the relation between political, media and citizen actors and the “effects” these fields have upon one another in the public debate. It is these unintentional effects, captured through the language of “homology” (i.e. indirect links), that are important to define power relations as the platform’s affordances for communication and interaction are inclined to conceal or disguise those in power. This can be understood as the “conversationalization” of the public discourse (Fairclough, 1994) and entails a critical understanding of the evolution of public debate, as it evolves towards the adoption of informal, conversational language and practices, but does not necessarily reflect a real shift in power.

The understanding of the relations between the fields is at the heart of our methodology; that is, network analysis. The application of network analysis for the investigation of social fields was initially criticized by Bourdieu but, through its evolution and developments, has been revisited as a method to assess fields (de Nooy, 2003). The point of the study is not to provide exhaustive empirical evidence on Twitter’s interrelation with the political and the media field, but to provide a number of findings that illustrate their systematic interdependence. The Belgian case is discussed below, as it fits within but does not constitute the overarching framework.

We do acknowledge the dependency and autonomy between the fields may vary across societies.

### **3.1.3 Research design**

The empirical appropriation of Bourdieu's conceptual tools, mainly "field" and "autonomy", brings forth contingencies and challenges related to the ambiguities linked with the concepts (Couldry, 2003). We outline the Belgian case and elaborate on the choices we made concerning Twitter data collection and processing in the light of the network analysis we conducted.

#### **The local elections in Belgium**

The country under investigation is the Western European country Belgium. Based on the models of media and politics that Hallin and Mancini (2004) distinguish, Belgium represents a democratic corporatist model. Without extensive elaboration upon all its dimensions, it signifies media autonomy and journalistic professionalization, early development of the mass-circulation press and strong public service broadcasting. Here, we focus on Flanders, the northern part of Belgium and home to the Dutch-speaking community. In the Belgian federal state, press, information, culture and audio-visual matters have been allocated to the communities. When we speak of national media, these reflect Flemish media, as there are no national media for Belgium (De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010).

The article represents Twitter data of the provincial, municipal and district elections of 2012 that took place on 14 October. The electoral context in Belgium is characterized by a multiparty system, whereby parties compete against one another but must work with each other to form a coalition. Important to mention here is that voting is mandatory in Belgium. Despite the distinct local and regional orientation of the elections, national mass media devoted a lot of attention to it (Epping, De Smedt, Walgrave, & Hooghe, 2013). During election times, the importance and influence of mass media increases, for national as well as local campaigning (Van Aelst, 2008). In addition, this post-broadcasting era reflects a fragmented news environment in which citizens, but also politicians and journalists, can embrace the interactivity and autonomy that is often associated with this networked media environment (Prior, 2006). This is true for local elections where personal information and mobilization of voters is highly valued (Van Aelst, 2008). Nonetheless, Twitter use is higher for politicians active at the Flemish

level compared to the local level. Concerning the latter, 14% of the municipal governments and about 11% of the mayors have a Twitter account compared to 60% of the members of the Flemish parliament.<sup>1</sup> Both local and regional politicians took part in the election debate on Twitter.

## Data collection

The Twitter API allows us to capture tweets containing a certain keyword or hashtag using the open-source tool *yourTwapperKeeper* (Bruns, 2012). Following this procedure, we collected a corpus of 43.447 tweets containing the general hashtag of the local elections (i.e. #vk2012). We acknowledge that the hashtag approach is not comprehensive but it is nonetheless commonly applied for data collection during election times (Bruns & Burgess, 2011; Bruns & Highfield, 2013; Larsson & Moe, 2012). Moreover, in Belgium, the hashtag was consistently initiated and supported by the mass media (e.g. through display on the TV screen), which contributed to the general adoption of the hashtag by Twitter users. However, as Larsson and Moe (2012) rightly stress, accidental contributions or more inexperienced users might be left out. In addition, these scholars acknowledge the limitation of the hashtag approach concerning the inclusion of follow-up messages. Nonetheless, they point to the use of the hashtag as the user's intentional contribution to the public debate. These hashtags are clickable and searchable, which contributes to their visibility.

The 43.447 messages correspond to 11.658 users participating publicly in the election debate. Despite this substantial number, we make no attempt to generalize this specific user base to the wider population or the electorate as such. Apart from users that represent political parties and mass media, it is likely we are dealing with "political junkies" (Coleman, 2003) or in similar vein "news junkies" (Prior, 2006). The adoption of Twitter by the Dutch-speaking community in Belgium lags behind other social media platforms, such as Facebook (62%). Twitter use is on the rise though, with a 13% increase compared to 2011, resulting in 27% that have an account (iMinds-iLab.o, 2012).

For the construction of our conversation networks, we extract from the corpus all messages that contain "markers for addressivity" (Papacharissi & De Fatima Oliveira, 2012); that is, tweets including @-signs in the form of replies (tweets that start with "@name") and mentions (tweets with "@name" in the text). Hence, only about 16% of the original number of messages was retained. These percentages are comparable to

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<sup>1</sup> The lists of local governments and mayors on Twitter are compiled by the Flemish organization for municipalities, called the VVSG (<https://twitter.com/vvsg/lists/>)

other studies on social media and elections making use of the hashtag approach (Bruns & Burgess, 2011; Larsson & Moe, 2012). Replies and mentions allow the user to specifically, yet publicly, address specific other users (Honeycutt & Herring, 2009). Replies and mentions reflect conversation practices as well as positions. According to Ausserhofer and Maireder (2013), these markers indicate one's authority in the network. In this respect, we relate the struggle over symbolic capital (i.e. the legitimation on Twitter) to the number of replies and mentions one receives in the network. In combination with the sender's identity (as we discuss below), this allows us to understand how positions (and practices) of Twitter users are structured.

### **Data processing and analysis**

The discussion of the Twitter network is based on a comparison between four distinct but subsequent stages in the conversation, as they show differences in traffic as well as in meaning: campaign (pre-election), Election Day and post-campaign (post-election). Concerning the election campaign, the week before the elections shows a steady increase in Twitter traffic and is defined as a separate period, resulting in four networks: (1) 1 September 2012 to 7 October 2012 (pre-election), (2) 8 October 2012 to 13 October 2012 (prior week), (3) 14 October 2012 (Election Day) and (4) 15 October 2012 to 21 October 2012 (post-election).

We use the SNA software UCINET (Borgatti et al., 2002) to analyse the consecutive networks, which allows a comparative and more detailed understanding of the conversation. In order to understand how positions and practices of Twitter users are related to their identity as a political, media or citizen actor, we coded the senders and receivers of the messages accordingly. We acknowledge that Twitter identity is problematic as it is self-defined and therefore does not always (or ever) fit traditional categorization schemes (Lewis et al., 2013). In addition, user identities can be absent or updated and modified invariably. The definition of users as political, media and citizen actors is based on their username and description, as publicly available, at the time the network analysis was conducted (April 2013). The actors can reflect entities (e.g. parties) and individuals (e.g. politicians). Although we acknowledge identity as a plural process, as we operate in multiple different contexts, we define political and media actors in terms of their formal, professional identity. Whereas the definition of media and political actors is salient, this is less the case for citizen users. We opted for a rather rigid approach here, excluding users that are publicly affiliated with (or represent) political/governmental organizations, media institutions and other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or movements that are political in nature (such as unions). In addition, accounts that relate to municipalities or events are excluded as well. We acknowledge that this influences the network but, in order to understand the

relationship between the three actor types, clear categories reveal the relations and networks we are most interested in.

### 3.1.4 Results

The discussion of our findings starts with an assessment of the network, as an objective structure, reflecting the positions actors occupy in the network, as politician, media or citizen. Thereafter, the characteristics of the conversation networks are defined, to end with a comparison between both the objective and inter-subjective structures to understand how the former is related to the latter.

#### The objective structure of the network

We start with an overview of the different actors that make up the network for each of the periods under analysis. More specifically, Table 5 provides the number of actors that address other actors and/or were addressed during the four specific periods. It is through their positions within the field, as political, media or citizen user, that actors are objectively related, in a sense that these relations appear even when there is no interaction.

As Table 5 shows, the structure of the network changes in an objective sense (i.e. the constellation of actors in terms of their objective position). Change is primarily related to the drop in politicians' presence in the debate (from 35% and 30% to 11% and 17%).

Table 5 (Relative) count of the different actors by period

	Actors			
	Political	Media	Citizen	Total
Pre-election(01-09-12 to 07-10-12)	295 (37%)	119 (15%)	383 (48%)	797 (100%)
Prior week (08-10 12 to 13-10-12)	143 (31%)	83 (18%)	234 (51%)	460 (100%)
Election Day (14-10-12)	90 (11%)	119 (15%)	585 (74%)	794 (100%)
Post-election (15-10-12 to 21-10-12)	129 (17%)	94 (13%)	530 (70%)	753 (100%)

It seems that politicians mobilize or inform (or are mobilized or informed) more before Election Day, or when the stakes are higher, than after Election Day. As shown in Table 5, aside from politicians, the relative numbers remain largely stable. The high number of citizen actors in the debate is similar to research on interaction patterns in the Austrian political Twittersphere, where about half of the users were citizens without

professional political affiliation (Ausserhofer & Maireder, 2013). In this respect, the variety of actors shows that *presence* in the conversation network is fairly unrelated to one's position in the media or the political field.

### **The inter-subjective structure of the network**

In addition to presence, we want to relate the *positions* the actors hold in the conversation network with the positions they hold as a political, media or citizen actor. Before doing that, we describe the conversation networks (i.e. the inter-subjective relations between the actors) as such, using a selection of SNA measures. First, we calculated the density of the network (or the number of connections between users divided by the number of total possible connections), which shows how tightly knit the network is. Second, network centralization indicates the network's tendency towards centrality or the concentration of interactions around a few particular actors. For both measures, no significant differences were found between the four networks reflecting the four periods under analysis (i.e. the election campaign, the prior week, Election Day and the week after the elections). Hence, for reasons of clarity, we discuss these results as a collective in the paragraph below, but the specific values can be found in the footnote below.<sup>2</sup>

The density of the conversation networks is very low (i.e. below 1%). This means that we found very little interaction among the different actors in our networks, given the total amount of actors in the networks. Most of them are only connected to one other actor in the network. Although the hashtag is clickable and searchable, which allows users to interact with users beyond their timeline, this potential is not necessarily put into practice. Concerning network centralization, the measures are rather low as well (i.e. around 5%), suggesting variance in the distribution of centrality in the networks. This means that a lot of different users address a lot of different other users, rather than one or a few central users surrounded by peripheral ones.

Finally, we look at the strength of the interactions, that is, how frequently users interact with others. For the networks in general, the average number of messages sent/received per actor is no greater than two. This means that most relations between users in the network reflect one or two mentions or replies. We do note that the distribution of the messages is skewed to the right, meaning that most actors send (or receive) only one or two messages and very few actors send (or receive) a lot of

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<sup>2</sup> The statistics on density and centrality of the network: Density: (P1): 0.2%, (P2): 0.3%, (P3): 0.2%, (P4): 0.2%, In-degree centralization: (P1): 3.96%, (P2): 3.46%, (P3): 4.39%, (P4): 12.89%, Out-degree centralization: (P1): 5.22%, (P2): 3.02%, (P3): 3%, (P4): 8.23%

messages. This is the power law distribution (or long tail), which applies to user activity on social media in general and creates inevitable inequality in participation (Shirky, 2008).

The combination of the measures shows dispersed networks with great variation in the centrality of the positions the actors occupy in the networks. Below, we account for this variation, as we distinguish between political, media and citizen actors.

### **How inter-subjective structures relate to objective structures**

Below, we present three measures (and three tables) that refer to the conversation structure of the networks and how this relates to the objective positions of the actors; that is, politician, media or citizen.

First, for each of the four periods, we look for differences between political, media and citizen actors concerning the number of replies or mentions they received and sent. For out-degree (messages sent), no differences between the different actor types were found. For in-degree (messages received), however, we found significant differences between political, media and citizen actors. In Table 6, we provide an overview of average number of replies and mentions each of the actor types receive and the significant differences between them (based on the F statistic included in the table).

Table 6 Average in-degree centrality by actor type and by period

	Political actors	Media actors	Citizen actors	<i>F</i> ***
Period 1 (P1)	<i>M</i> = 2.60 ( <i>SD</i> = 5.61)	<i>M</i> = 3.24 ( <i>SD</i> = 7.98)	<i>M</i> = .80 ( <i>SD</i> = 1.49)	18.63 (2, 797)
Period 2 (P2)	<i>M</i> = 2.20 ( <i>SD</i> = 4.04)	<i>M</i> = 2.57 ( <i>SD</i> = 4.44)	<i>M</i> = .59 ( <i>SD</i> = 1.08)	19.31 (2, 457)
Period 3 (P3)	<i>M</i> = 3.36 ( <i>SD</i> = 5.39)	<i>M</i> = 2.95 ( <i>SD</i> = 6.23)	<i>M</i> = .85 ( <i>SD</i> = 1.49)	37.55 (2, 791)
Period 4 (P4)	<i>M</i> = 4.16 ( <i>SD</i> = 11.41)	<i>M</i> = 3.57 ( <i>SD</i> = 8.57)	<i>M</i> = .57 ( <i>SD</i> = 1.28)	27.37 (2, 750)

*M*: Mean, *SD*: Standard deviation

P1: pre-election (01-09-12 to 07-10-12), P2: prior week (08-10-12 to 13-10-12), P3: Election Day (14-10-12), P4: post-election (15-10-12 to 21-10-12)

\*\*\*  $p < .001$

What we find is that the central positions in the conversation network are related to the objective positions these actors occupy in the network (as political, media or citizen actor). The variation in centrality in the conversation networks (as discussed above) cannot be mistaken for an egalitarian structure. Taking part in the discussion is one thing but taking position is another. Whereas the conversation networks are dominated



by citizens in terms of presence, the central positions are related to political and media actors.

Taking a closer look at the variation between the different periods, we see that political actors receive more replies and mentions on and after Election Day. Future research, focusing on the content of the messages, could indicate whether communication on and after the elections reflects the confirmation and dissemination of the election results and whether communication prior to the elections serves to make more informed voting decisions.

Second, given our interest in the relations between political, media and citizen actors, we conducted an External/Internal ratio analysis, or E-I index, to define to what extent the overall networks are characterized by out-group as opposed to in-group relations (Krackhardt & Stern, 1988). Here, we aim to understand to what extent the three actor types communicate with one another or whether for example politicians mainly communicate with other politicians. Only on Election Day and the week after the elections (Periods 3 and 4) do the measures indicate a different network structure from what can be expected, taking into account the group sizes and network density (Hanneman & Riddle, 2011) (see Table 7). Hence, we focus on rows 3 and 4 in the table.

Table 7 General and group-level E-I indices by period

	Observed (expected)	Standard deviation	Political actors	Media actors	Citizen actors
Period 1 (P1)	0.278 (0.220)	<i>SD</i> = 0.037	0.089	0.679	0.280
Period 2 (P2)	0.325 (0.227)	<i>SD</i> = 0.047	0.103	0.407	0.254
Period 3 (P3)	0.140* (-0.155)	<i>SD</i> = 0.056	0.604	0.596	-0.157
Period 4 (P4)	0.430* (-0.079)	<i>SD</i> = 0.086	0.661	0.617	0.235

The E-I index is calculated as follows: [the number of ties external to the group – the number of ties internal to the group]/[the total number of ties]. The results range from -1 [all ties internal] to +1 [all ties external].

P1: pre-election (01-09-12 to 07-10-12), P2: prior week (08-10-12 to 13-10-12), P3: Election Day (14-10-12), P4: post-election (15-10-12 to 21-10-12)

\*  $p < .05$

The significant measures for Election Day and the week after reflect intensified communication patterns between the different groups (i.e. politician, media and citizen). Taking a look at the scores per group, they are high for media and political actors and low for citizens, meaning that, predominantly, media and political actors are interconnected. These high out-group tendencies of political and media actors relate to a study by Ausserhofer and Maireder (2013) on political tweeting in Austria that shows more dense and interlinked networks between established actors (i.e. politicians, journalists and experts).

To conclude, the measure of reciprocity allows us to define whether communication works in both directions and how this relates to the positions the actors hold (i.e. political, media or citizen). The measure takes into account to what extent political, media or citizen actors reply or mention users that replied or mentioned them first. Again, this measure is calculated on group level, to understand whether political, media or citizen actors differ in reciprocity.

We specifically point to the first two columns in Table 8 (see  $M \rightarrow C$  and  $P \rightarrow C$ ), which show that for citizens, reciprocity towards political and media actors is consistently higher than the other way around (see  $C \rightarrow P$  and  $C \rightarrow M$ ). When citizens receive mentions and replies from these actors, they are more likely to respond than when political or media actors receive mentions or replies from citizens. This pattern is found for each of the four periods, although, in the week after the elections, citizens are less reciprocal towards politicians.

Table 8 Reciprocity by actor type and by period

	$M \rightarrow C$	$P \rightarrow C$	$P \rightarrow M$	$C \rightarrow P$	$C \rightarrow M$	$M \rightarrow P$
Period 1 (P1)	12%	12.87%	1.11%	5.31%	1.79%	1.12%
Period 2 (P2)	20%	12.9%	2.22%	3.28%	4.26%	3.23%
Period 3 (P3)	14.29%	11.54%	14.29%	1.84%	2.57%	1.96%
Period 4 (P4)	22.22%	5.45%	3.23%	0.87%	0.97%	2.86%

P: political actors; M: media actors; C: citizen actors.

The table gives the percentages for each of the ties going from actor A to actor B that are reciprocated.

P1: pre-election (01-09-12 to 07-10-12), P2: prior week (08-10-12 to 13-10-12), P3: Election Day (14-10-12), P4: post-election (15-10-12 to 21-10-12)

In general, we can state that variations in symbolic capital (i.e. legitimation), which we define as the number of mentions and replies one receives, are related to the positions the actors hold (i.e. political, media or citizen). In addition, the variance in conversation practices on Twitter is significantly related to the different user types. Below, we wrap up the main findings and elaborate upon future theoretical endeavours and the limitations of the study.

### 3.1.5 Conclusion and discussion

Conversations on Twitter are understood within a broad conceptual framework, or field. The structure of these conversations allows us to understand how Twitter is related to the political and the media field. In this respect, this article adds perspectives to the theoretical understanding of the role of social media in the public debate. We defined different aspects of autonomy related to the presence of the different actor

types, their positions in the conversation networks and the conversation practices between each of the groups. Via our network analyses and statistical comparison between the different actor types, we provide new methods and measures to better understand these emerging practices.

At the beginning of this article, we discussed the affordances of Twitter and how they can alter relations between (1) the media and their audiences, and (2) politicians and their electorate. In essence, we understand the public debate as a combination of and overlap between three fields. Within this framework, we understand the relatedness between the fields and to what extent these emerging spheres (e.g. Twitter) resemble the existing ones (the political and the media field). In turn, we pose the following questions: How autonomous should Twitter be? How can autonomy enhance democracy or even reflect potential shifts in power? The relatedness between the fields allows us to define different arenas and different perspectives for change, and hence, different answers for these questions.

In the following, we define specific limitations of this study in relation to avenues for future work, whereby we distinguish between methodological and theoretical issues. First, we point to the time-bound character and social specificity of our analyses. Fields (and their logics and occupants) evolve over time and other countries, different contexts (e.g. outside elections) or social media platforms potentially generate other levels of autonomy and dependency. Second, concerning data collection and analysis, we acknowledge that the hashtag approach influences the messages we collected and the measures we calculated. Results could be different when we depart from a collection of users to construct conversation networks. Concerning follow-up research, we point to content analysis to better understand the differences in conversation practices. In addition, in-depth interviews could reveal how the different actor types perceive these structures and whether there are contradictory findings between our measures and their perceptions.

The notion of capital, which received only peripheral attention in this article but which is central in the struggle over positions in the field, also needs further elaboration. Aside mentions and replies, other field-specific attributes of the actors can provide additional explanatory power for the positions the actors hold in the field (e.g. general user activity or creativity/diversity in content). In addition, understanding the practices of actors within the field in relation to their positions in other fields can benefit from elaboration upon the notions of “illusio” (i.e. the belief that the game or struggle for capital is worth playing) and “doxa” (i.e. tacit presuppositions that organize action within the field) (Bourdieu, 1990). We can wonder to what extent actors vary in their understanding of the game and/or the fact that the game is worth playing. Perhaps for citizens, it makes more sense to engage in the game as they are dominated, whereas

political and media actors already hold dominant positions in the conversation network. Related to this, we touch upon Couldry's (2003) notion of media meta-capital or the power to confer legitimacy *across* fields. This concept allows us to understand how media attention (of people and/or issues) translates into power across fields, that is, to the general society. Such a perspective would benefit from the understanding of the interdependencies between mass and social media, in political as well as other contexts. The field-based approach allows a systemic and multidimensional understanding of these platforms through the focus on specific actors and related practices, as these actors and their respective fields collide in contemporary multi-media landscape.

## 3.2 Study II: The election debate on Twitter: Comparing political, media and citizen actors' positions and communicative practices (II)

**D'heer, E. (*in review*). The logic of Twitter Networks: A social network analysis perspective on communication patterns among political, media and citizen actors.**

This study can be considered a follow-up study of Study I, as it is very similar in its methodological design. Whereas Study I focuses on the 2012 elections, Study II discusses the 2014 election debate on Twitter. Bourdieu's field concept is less prominent in Study II, as we decided to elaborate on the concept of social media logic. Research questions are centred on the technological and socio-cultural dimensions of social media logic: (1) de-centralized communication and (2) self-selective communication. The first dimension reflects the possibilities for two-way communication flows between political and media actors and citizens (which is also the focus in Study I). The second dimension refers to the occurrence of communication between like-minded users. Here, we specify like-mindedness as communication along party lines.

Compared to Study I, we opted for a slightly different and more extensive set of measures (in part related to the additional research questions). These measures still allow for a comparison with the findings from Study I, but add new insights as well. Alike Study I, Study II shows political and media actors take central positions in the debate. They receive attention from citizens, but they are less likely to return it. Further, we identify communication runs *along* rather than *across* party lines. Politicians are more likely to communicate with politicians belonging to the same party. Further, communication between citizens and politicians is more likely to occur *along* party lines as well.

In the concluding section of the paper, we argue for follow-up research to enrich these structural communication patterns. Further, we point to the need to develop and extend the concept of social media logic. Studies III to V included in this thesis build on and enrich the insights retrieved from Study II.

### 3.2.1 Introduction

Over the last years, the use of social media in political discussion has received considerable attention by scholars, in part related to the success of Obama's 2008 social

media campaign. Numerous studies focus on the activities of traditional political actors (politicians and parties) on the platform during election times (Bruns & Highfield, 2013; Graham, Broersma, Hazelhoff, et al., 2013; Larsson & Ihlen, 2015; Vergeer, Hermans, & Sams, 2011). In general, strong empirical evidence for two-way communication between political elites and citizens is still missing. Following, we find studies that include mass media and journalists in the political debate (Bruns & Burgess, 2011; Larsson & Moe, 2012) and to a minor extent, activities of citizen users have been integrated as well (Ausserhofer & Maireder, 2013; D'heer & Verdegem, 2014). This study includes political, media and citizen actors to understand communication patterns among the respective actor types. More specifically, social network analysis allows us to identify the structural characteristics of communication on Twitter.

We assess to what extent Twitter follows its network media logic (Klinger & Svensson, 2014). Based on Altheide and Snow's (1979) media logic theory, Klinger and Svensson (2014) stress the non-neutral character of social media in shaping communication and information flows. As specific elements of Twitter's network logic, we scrutinize to what extent Twitter connects both elite and non-elite actors and whether communication predominantly takes place between like-minded users (i.e. along party lines). Our analyses are based on the identification of over 8000 Twitter users discussing the 2014 elections in Belgium; a Western democracy characterized by a fragmented party system. We defined politicians' party membership to assess communication along and across party lines. Initially focusing on the blogosphere, researchers found linking behaviour along conservative and liberal lines in the US (Ackland & Shorish, 2009; Adamic & Glance, 2005). Recently, a few Twitter studies have been conducted, showing evidence of sub-networks of conservatives and liberals in the US (Colleoni, Rozza, & Arvidsson, 2014; Conover et al., 2011) and similarities between Twitter networks and "the structure of the political field" in Germany (Plotkowiak & Stanoevska-Slabeva, 2013).

Our research design and empirical work are preceded by the presentation of our conceptual framework and related work. As explained in detail below, our theoretical framework builds on recent conceptualizations of social media's network logic (Klinger & Svensson, 2014), with a particular focus on the role of social media platforms in politics and political communication.

### 3.2.2 Theoretical framework

#### Social media's network logic: Theory and practice

Social media are distinct from traditional media in the way they operate. Based on Altheide and Snow's (1979) media logic theory, social media scholars discuss the non-neutral character of social media in shaping (political) communication and information flows (Klinger & Svensson, 2014; van Dijck & Poell, 2013). Below, we discuss the relevant dimensions of social media logic in relation to our research aim and derived research questions.

#### The de-centralization of communication

As argued by Klinger and Svensson (2014), content production on social media is characterized by concepts as "produsage" (Bruns, 2008). Online content is not fixed, but reflects an on-going process of evaluation and discussion, in which professional as well as lay people have their place. Concerning social media and democracy in particular, this is associated with the inclusion of multiple citizen-actors in the political debate, which is traditionally dominated by established authorities, like politicians and mass media. Traditionally, these established actors operate via a "broadcasting logic" which is often contrasted with social media's potential for dialogue (Larsson & Ihlen, 2015; Sjöberg & Rydin, 2013). Concisely put, traditional mass media's logic follows selection by professional gatekeepers based on established news values, tailored to mass audiences (Klinger & Svensson, 2014; Strömbäck & Esser, 2014a). In addition, politicians need public support for their political viewpoints (Esser, 2013; Meyer, 2002). Consequently, they rely on one-way intermediation channels such as television or newspapers to legitimate their political programs. As Klinger (2014, p. 733) argues, "*Parties have adapted well to the mass media logic, they still face the challenge of having to adapt to the new logic of social media as well*".

Politicians' use of Twitter allows for "connected representation" (Graham, Broersma, & Hazelhoff, 2013). More specifically, networking technologies allow immediate, two-way channels of communication, un-mediated by traditional media. Although politicians have discovered social media as tools to connect with citizens, strong empirical evidence for a two-way flow is still missing (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013; Graham, Broersma, & Hazelhoff, 2013; Klinger, 2014). Nevertheless, politicians acknowledge it is important to be present on social media (Ross & Bürger, 2014). For Twitter in particular, its close relation with mass media outlets explains politicians' presence on the micro-blogging service (Broersma & Graham, 2012). Research has shown that journalists often use politicians' social media messages in newspaper articles (Broersma & Graham, 2013; Paulussen & Harder, 2014) and political journalists incorporate the use of Twitter in

their daily routines and practices (Parmelee, 2013b; Rogstad, 2013). Related, politicians link Twitter, rather than Facebook, to political junkies and journalists (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013; Ross & Bürger, 2014).

Journalism itself is challenged and changed by the advent of social media, giving rise to concepts as “network journalism” (Heinrich, 2011) or “ambient journalism” (Hermida, 2010). The network metaphor is associated with the inclusion of non-professionals in the news making process. Nonetheless, scholars have observed the continuing nature of conventional journalistic practices in relation to user-generated content in the newsroom (Broersma & Graham, 2012; Domingo, 2008; Williams, Wardle, & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2011). News media do allow users to share, comment and discuss already produced material, e.g. via Facebook comments and likes (Hille & Bakker, 2013) or via the dissemination of Twitter links to news websites (Barnard, 2016). Social media become part of people’s cross-media repertoires, although commenting is not necessarily a widespread practice (Nielsen & Schrøder, 2014).

In sum, a first set of research questions is related to Twitter’s role in the de-centralization of political communication. Brants and Voltmer (2011) define de-centralization as reflective of the changing relation between media and political elites on the one hand and citizens on the other. In short, they refer to changes in the vertical dimension of political communication. As the research questions show, we assess political, media and citizen actors’ presence, structural positions and conversational practices to account for the de-centralization of political communication. In doing so, we follow Maireder and Ausserhofer’s (2013) call for the categorization of Twitter users in terms of profession (or political orientation, see RQ4 and RQ5 below) to organize future research and international comparisons.

*RQ1: Who tweets about the national elections, distinguishing political, media and citizen actors?*

*RQ2: Who are the central actors in the Twitter debate on the elections, distinguishing political, media and citizen actors?*

*RQ3: Who communicates with whom, distinguishing political, media and citizen actors?*

### **The self-selective nature of communication**

A second set of questions is related to social media’s network logic of consumption and use. Klinger and Svensson (2014) argue social media enable selective exposure and fragmented audiences, including like-minded peers. The web is inherently connective, linking both people and content in a myriad of ways. As Manovich (2001, p. 57) argues,



*“individual media elements (images, pages of text, etc.) always retain their individual identity”, but can be “wired together into more than one object”.* The modularity of web content allows for the personalization of information flows, which is further enhanced by social media’s algorithms (e.g. recommendations) (van Dijck & Poell, 2013).

The self-selective nature of users’ social media activities allows for contact based on similar political beliefs. Concepts as political homophily (e.g. Adamic & Glance, 2005) and cyberbalkanization (Sunstein, 2001) are concerned with the web’s role in the reinforcement of established positions and opinions. Only recently, political homophily has been assessed on Twitter. Examinations of politicians’ use of Twitter showed homogenous clusters, as politicians make reference to party members rather than rival parties (Boutet, Kim, & Yoneki, 2013; Plotkowiak & Stanoevska-Slabeva, 2013). Political candidates act as “networked individuals” (Wellman et al., 2003), connecting with colleague candidates through their personal set of followers, via tags and mentions. Beyond politicians, a US based study on the 2009 Twitter election debate found evidence that Twitter is *“conducive to an echo chamber-like scenario”* (Colleoni et al., 2014, p. 328). For the US, this reflects two ideological clusters of Twitter users. Belgium reflects a multi-party system, which potentially complicates the formation of distinct communities in the debate. Research questions 4 and 5 are thus:

RQ4: *To what extent do political actors interact with party members rather than rivals?*

RQ5: *To what extent do citizen actors interact with political actors belonging to the same party or different parties?*

### **3.2.3 Research design**

Below we document the choices we made concerning the data collection and analyses to answer our research questions. We start with the Belgian case, followed by the rationale of the collection and processing of the data in the light of the network analyses we conducted.

#### **The 2014 elections in Belgium**

The country under investigation is the Western European country Belgium. Based on the models of media and politics Hallin and Macini (2004) distinguish, Belgium represents a democratic corporatist model. Without extensive elaboration upon all its dimensions, it signifies media autonomy and journalistic professionalization, early development of the mass-circulation press and strong public service broadcasting. Here, we focus on Flanders, the northern part of Belgium and home to the Dutch-speaking community. Since the late 1960s, Belgian political parties and traditional media are organized along

regional lines, i.e. Flanders (ca. 6 million inhabitants) and Wallonia (ca. 4 million inhabitants). Consequently, we find two separate election campaigns. The political landscape is characterized by a fragmented multiparty system, whereby parties compete against one another but must work together with each other to form a coalition.

In what is being dubbed “the mother of all elections”, Flemish citizens voted for candidates that represent three electoral levels, i.e. regional (here: Flanders), federal (i.e. Belgium) and European. Election Day was held 25 May 2014. The candidates are electable in Flanders, but can be elected for the Flemish, federal or European Parliament. Based on survey data, we know 52% of the Flemish candidates running for the 2014 elections has a Twitter account (Van Aelst, van Erkel, D’heer, & Harder, 2015).

Voting is mandatory and is based on candidate lists, organized per electoral district (of which Flanders counts six). This implies that, per party, citizens can vote for the list (and agree with the sequence of names) or vote for specific candidates on the list (and potentially alter the sequence of names). Six Flemish parties are represented in all six electoral districts in Flanders. The party names and respective ideologies are the following: CD&V (the Christian Democrats), GROEN (the Green party), N-VA (the Flemish nationalist party), Open VLD (the Liberal party), Sp.a (the Social Democrats) and Vlaams Belang (the right-wing extremist party). Based on these six parties, we assess the existence of distinct political communities in the debate (RQ4 and 5).

### **Data collection**

Via the self-hosted open-source tool yourTwapperKeeper, we collected tweets containing the dedicated hashtags of the elections (i.e. #vk14/#vk2014). yourTwapperKeeper uses the Twitter streaming and REST APIs to collect Twitter messages (Bruns, 2012). Following this procedure, we collected a corpus of 116.823 tweets corresponding to 23.602 users over a five week period. We acknowledge that the hashtag approach is not exhaustive but it is nonetheless commonly applied for data collection during election times (Bruns & Burgess, 2011; Bruns & Highfield, 2013; Larsson & Moe, 2012). Moreover, in Flanders, the hashtag was consistently initiated by the mass media (e.g. through display on the TV screen), which contributed to the general adoption of the hashtag by Twitter users. However, as Moe and Larsson (2012) rightly stress, accidental contributions or more inexperienced users might be left out. In addition, scholars acknowledge the limitation of the hashtag approach with respect to the inclusion of follow-up messages (Ausserhofer & Maireder, 2013; Bruns & Burgess, 2011; Larsson & Moe, 2012). Nonetheless, they point to the use of the hashtag as the user’s intentional contribution to the public debate. Hashtags are clickable and searchable, which contributes to their visibility.

Nonetheless the substantial number of tweets and users we collected, we make no attempt to generalize this specific user base to the wider population or the electorate as such. Aside the users that represent political parties and mass media, it is likely we are dealing with “political junkies” (Coleman, 2003) or in similar vein “news junkies” (Prior, 2006). The use of Twitter by the Dutch-speaking community in Belgium lags behind other social media platforms, such as Facebook (68%), as about 21% has an active Twitter account (iMinds-iLab.o, 2014).

For the construction of our communication networks, we extract from the corpus all messages that contain “markers for addressivity” (Papacharissi & de Fatima Oliveira, 2012); that is, tweets including @-signs in the form of replies (tweets that start with @name) and mentions (tweets with @name in the text, e.g. “.@name” or a reply chain including multiple “@names” in a row). Replies and mentions allow users to specifically, yet publically, address specific other users in the messy and speedy environment of real-time messages (Honeycutt & Herring, 2009). @names reflect both communication practices and positions, whereby the latter are based on counts of @names. These counts are recognized as parameters of influence (Ausserhofer & Maireder, 2013). In combination with the sender’s identity (as political, media and citizen actor), this allows us to understand how positions of Twitter users are structured.

## **Twitter data processing and social network analysis**

The discussion of the Twitter debate is based on the construction of four distinct but subsequent stages in the debate, as they show differences in traffic and in meaning; campaign (pre-election), Election Day and post-campaign (post-election). Concerning the election campaign, the prior week before the elections shows a steady increase in Twitter traffic and is defined as separate period, resulting in four periods, hence, four networks. The respective periods are the following: (1) 25 April to 18 May 2014 (pre-election), (2) 19 May to 24 May 2014 (prior week), (3) 25 May 2014 (election day) and (4) 26 May to 1 June (post-election).

We use the SNA software UCINET (Borgatti et al., 2002) to analyse the consecutive networks, which allows for a more detailed understanding of the election debate. For each of the periods, .csv data files were prepared containing @names in two columns (i.e. from and to). The datasets were cleaned rigorously before they were entered in UCINET (e.g. consistency in usernames within and over the four analytical periods). In order to generate a sufficiently large, yet manageable sample of relations, per period the “main component”, i.e. the largest component of connected nodes, is extracted for further analysis. This procedure is done in UCINET and allows us to reduce the data, yet maintain the prominent actors in the debate (Hanneman & Riddle, 2005). Following this procedure across the four periods, we ended up with 8680 unique users which were

coded as political, media or citizen actors. We acknowledge Twitter identity is problematic as it is self-defined and therefore does not always fit traditional categorization schemes (Lewis, Zamith, & Hermida, 2013). In addition, user identities can be absent or updated and modified invariably.

The definition of users as political, media and citizen actors is based on their username and description, as publicly available at the time the network analyses were conducted (July - August 2014). The actors can reflect entities (e.g. parties) and individuals (e.g. politicians). Although we acknowledge identity as a plural process, as we operate in different contexts, we define political and media actors in terms of their formal, professional identity. Concerning politicians' party membership (which we coded in order to answer RQ5 and 6), we include candidates that represent one of the following Flemish parties; CD&V (the Christian Democrats), GROEN (the Green party), N-VA (the Flemish nationalist party), Open VLD (the Liberal party), Sp.a (the Social Democrats) and Vlaams Belang (the right-wing extremist party). Whereas the definition of media and political actors is rather salient, for citizen users this is less the case. We opted for a rather rigid approach here, excluding users that are publically affiliated with (or represent) political/governmental organizations, media institutions and other NGO's or movements that are political in nature (such as unions). In addition, accounts that are not related to persons or groups of persons, such as events or municipalities, are excluded as well. We acknowledge this influences the network, but in order to understand the relation among the three actor types, clear categories reveal the relations and networks we are most interested in.

As mentioned above, data analyses are conducted in the SNA software UCINET, which allows for an inferential-statistical approach. The type of relations studied here is "interaction" (i.e. talking with/about) (Borgatti, 2007). For these interactional ties, tie strength is measured by frequency, hence, quantitatively determined. First, basic network statistics, such as the number of actors and ties were analysed per period. Second, the following number of procedures were employed: ANOVA analysis of variance, relational contingency table analysis and ANOVA density model for fixed homophily. Alike traditional ANOVA tests, group averages are calculated and compared, except that this procedure uses a permutation test that adjusts for the non-independence of network data; it yields standard errors and p-values based on simulations of the data.

First, we conducted ANOVA analyses to compare degree among political, media and citizen actors for each of the four periods (i.e. networks) we defined. Following, a relational contingency table analysis determines the ratio of observed versus expected ties within and between groups. The expected number of ties equals the number of ties expected by chance in a network of equal size and number of ties under a model of

independence (Hanneman & Riddle, 2005). Again this procedure is executed for each of the four networks we defined. Last, ANOVA density models test the likelihood that the density of the ties within each group defined by a particular attribute (here: party membership) differs from all ties that are not within groups (Hanneman & Riddle, 2005). First, we calculated models that assume variable homophily (i.e. differences in parties' tendency towards in-group connections). Since the parties show similar tendencies towards homophily, we ran constant homophily models. This procedure includes the calculation of regression coefficients to define the probability of in-group versus out-group communication. For citizens' affiliations with politicians (i.e. a two-mode network), we converted the data to a network of politicians only (i.e. a one-mode network) to calculate ANOVA density models. Data conversion accounts for the tie strength (i.e. the frequency of interactions between users). As aforementioned, analyses were executed for each of the four networks we defined.

### **3.2.4 Results**

The discussion of the results is structured along our research questions. First, we assess the actors present in the debate and their characteristics. Thereafter, we cover the positions of political, media and citizen actors and their interaction practices. Last, we explore to what extent interaction between politicians and about politicians runs across party lines.

#### **The prevalence of citizen actors in the debate**

We start with an overview of the different actors that make up the networks for each of the periods under analysis (i.e. from pre-election to Election Day to post-election). More specifically, Table 9 provides the number of actors that address and/or were addressed during the four specific periods.

Table 9 (Relative) count of the different actors by period

	Actors			
	Political	Media	Citizen	Total
Pre-election(25-04-14 to 18-05-14)	829 (29%)	347 (12%)	1649 (58%)	2825 (100%)
Prior week (19-05-14 to 24-05-14)	625 (30%)	261 (12%)	1260 (59%)	2146 (100%)
Election Day (25-05-14)	356 (12%)	300 (11%)	2196 (77%)	2852 (100%)
Post-election (26-05-14 to 01-06-14)	276 (21%)	151 (12%)	876 (67%)	1294 (100%)

During the periods before and after Election Day, the constellation of the debate changes. This is primarily related to the drop in politicians' presence in the debate (from 29% and 30% to 12% and 21%, see Table 9). It seems that politicians mobilize or inform (or are mobilized or informed) more before Election Day, or when the stakes are higher, than after Election Day. The relative amount of media actors remains rather stable, whereas the number of politicians decreases and the number of citizens increases. The high number of citizen actors in the debate is similar to research on the interaction patterns in the Austrian political Twittersphere, where about half of the users were citizens without professional political affiliation (Ausserhofer & Maireder, 2013). On Twitter, entry and participation in the political discussion is not conditional upon one's identity as a political or a media actor.

In addition to the relative presence of the different actor types, we assess to what extent unique users were found in one or more periodical networks. We found the large majority of the users (i.e. 68%) is present in only one of the four periodical networks. However, variability differs for political, media and citizen actors. The established actors (i.e. political and media actors) have a tendency towards more stable presence in the debate. In comparison to citizen actors, of which 3% was found across all four periods, 13% of the media actors and 12% of the political actors were present in all four networks. Overall, we find a highly variable constellation of unique users, whereas on a categorical level (see Table 9), the networks show more stability.

### **The centrality of elites in the debate**

Whereas the Twitter networks show the inclusion of non-elite actors, the question remains as to what positions they hold in the debate. Table 10 provides the average number of mentions and replies political, media and citizen actors receive. In network terminology, this is labelled in-degree centrality. Further, the comparative overview,

based on the  $F$  statistic included in Table 10, reveals significant differences between the different actors. Nevertheless, we acknowledge great variation between political and media actors (as the standard deviations and statistics indicate). For out-degree centrality or the number of mentions and replies sent, no differences between the actor types were found.

Table 10 Average in-degree centrality by actor type and by period

	Political actors	Media actors	Citizen actors	$F^{***}$
Period 1 (P1)	$M = 8.73$ ( $SD = 47.63$ )	$M = 17.25$ ( $SD = 52.67$ )	$M = 0.77$ ( $SD = 2.01$ )	25.69 (2, 2824)
Period 2 (P2)	$M = 6.59$ ( $SD = 35.19$ )	$M = 4.95$ ( $SD = 15.13$ )	$M = 0.62$ ( $SD = 1.34$ )	20.74 (2, 2145)
Period 3 (P3)	$M = 7.42$ ( $SD = 37.04$ )	$M = 7.07$ ( $SD = 37.9$ )	$M = 0.53$ ( $SD = 1.44$ )	35.38 (2, 2851)
Period 4 (P4)	$M = 5.08$ ( $SD = 22.65$ )	$M = 4.54$ ( $SD = 18.33$ )	$M = 0.52$ ( $SD = 1.93$ )	18.18 (2, 1293)

$M$ : Mean,  $SD$ : Standard deviation

P1: pre-election (25-04-14 to 18-05-14), P2: prior week (19-05-14 to 24-05-14), P3: Election Day (25-05-14),

P4: post-election (26-05-14 to 01-06-14)

\*\*\*  $p < .001$

Overall, we find the central positions in the Twitter networks are occupied by elite rather than non-elite actors (see also Ausserhofer & Maireder, 2013; D'heer & Verdegem, 2014; Larsson & Moe, 2012). Further, the centrality measures do not only provide information on the actors' positions in the debate, but indicate how communication flows among the respective actor types. Below, we include additional measures that provide insight in the interaction practices of the respective actor types, comparing elites versus non-elites in particular.

### **Imbalanced communication: From citizens to elites**

Given our interest in communication flows among political, media and citizen actors, we calculated a relational contingency table analysis. This procedure tests the relationship between network data and the categorical attribute data (i.e. actor type: political, media or citizen). Table 11 below shows the results as observed/expected ratios for both within- and between-group ties by actor type. For all periodical networks, the values are significantly different from what can be expected by random mixing and given the group sizes and number of ties under a model of independence (Hanneman & Riddle, 2005).

Concerning within-group ties, we notice higher ratios of observed/expected ties for political and media actors, compared to citizens. More specifically, the values over 1 indicate that more in-group interaction takes place than what would be expected (see M

→ M and P → P in Table 11). Research has shown politicians often communicate with other politicians, and as we discuss below, party members in particular (Ausserhofer & Maireder, 2013; Plotkowiak & Stanoevska-Slabeva, 2013; Thimm, Dang-Anh & Einspänner, 2014). The same goes for media actors and on Election Day in particular (see M → M and P3 in Table 11). The dissemination of the election results co-occurs with an increase in media coverage, which might relate to the increase in references to journalists and/or other media outlets.

Citizens interact with politicians and journalists more than expected, whereas interaction amongst citizens is lower than expected (see Table 11). Via social media, direct interaction with political and media elites is possible, giving them a visible voice in the debate. However, both elites' activity towards citizens is much lower than expected as shown by the values under 1 (see M → C and P → C in Table 11).

Table 11 Observed/expected tie density by actor type and by period

	M → P	M → C	M → M	P → M	P → C	P → P	C → M	C → P	C → C	$\chi^2$ ***
P1	<b>1.64</b>	0.17	<b>1.79</b>	<b>2.03</b>	0.23	<b>2.73</b>	<b>1.88</b>	<b>1.83</b>	0.31	5738.56
P2	<b>1.73</b>	0.14	<b>1.74</b>	<b>1.58</b>	0.19	<b>2.24</b>	<b>1.84</b>	<b>2.22</b>	0.34	3485.85
P3	<b>4.44</b>	0.18	<b>4.39</b>	<b>1.13</b>	0.13	<b>3.02</b>	<b>3.27</b>	<b>3.29</b>	0.34	8459.82
P4	<b>2.77</b>	0.12	<b>2.38</b>	<b>1.20</b>	0.07	<b>2.03</b>	<b>2.66</b>	<b>2.56</b>	0.41	2156.31

P: political actors; M: media actors; C: citizen actors.

Values are reported as the proportion of observed vs. expected number of ties within and between groups. Values in bold indicate a higher proportion of ties than what would be expected.

P1: Pre-election (25-04-14 to 18-05-14), P2: Prior week (19-05-14 to 24-05-14), P3: Election Day (25-05-14), P4: Post-election (26-05-14 to 01-06-14)

\*\*\*  $p < .001$

The findings from the relational contingency table analysis resonate with the measures presented in Table 10, which indicate higher average in-degree centrality for political and media actors. In other words, media and political actors receive attention from citizens rather than the other way around. More so, media and political actors interact more than expected (see M → P & P → M in Table 11), hence, we find denser and more interlinked networks between established actors as opposed to citizens (see also Ausserhofer & Maireder, 2013; D'heer & Verdegem, 2014).

### Sub-networks of political families

Based on the construction of networks containing politicians only, we ran ANOVA density models of constant homophily for the attribute "party membership". Based on



Table 12 below, we find evidence of sub-networks centred on the six Flemish parties we distinguish in this study: CD&V (the Christian Democrats), GROEN (the Green party), N-VA (the Flemish nationalist party), Open VLD (the Liberal party), Sp.a (the Social Democrats) and Vlaams Belang (the right-wing extremist party).

Table 12 Probabilities for within-group and between-group ties based on ANOVA density models for politicians' networks by period

	Period 1 (N= 690)	Period 2 (N= 514)	Period 3 (N= 284)	Period 4 (N= 221)
Intercept	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%
In-group	1.95%***	1.74%***	1.25%***	1.7%***

The intercept presents the probability of ties across party lines, whereas in-group reflects the *increase* in the probability of ties between party members.

P1: Pre-election (25-04-14 to 18-05-14), P2: Prior week (19-05-14 to 24-05-14), P3: Election Day (25-05-14), P4: Post-election (26-05-14 to 01-06-14)

\*\*\*  $p < .001$

Table 12 shows that the probability of interaction between party members is significantly higher than interaction across party lines. The overall low percentages visible in Table 12 are related to the low density scores we find for the entire networks. This means that the probability of any given tie between two random actors in the networks (from the same or different parties) is very low (i.e. less than 1%). This is related to the relative large sizes of the networks (which inevitably decreases density) (Prell, 2012), the focus on communication (rather than stable relations such as friendship) and hashtag-based sampling (rather than communication within a particular organization for example).

The findings are consistent with Twitter data on UK and German elections (Boutet et al., 2013; Plotkowiak & Stanoevska-Slabeva, 2013). We find evidence in favour of Twitter's network media logic; that is, interaction between like-minded users (Klinger & Svensson, 2014). In addition, the findings indicate Twitter serves the promotion of one's candidacy and party members' candidacy via mentions and replies from/to party members or the official party account (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013; Grant, Moon, & Grant, 2010).

### **Sub-networks of political families based on citizen affiliations**

Based on the findings above, we question whether citizens follow similar tendencies, hence, mainly address or are addressed by politicians belonging to similar rather than different parties. The analyses are based on the construction of networks of politicians (and their party membership) and citizens, accounting for the strength of the interactions (i.e. the number of interactions that occurs) (Borgatti & Everett, 1997).

Based on these networks, we ran ANOVA density models of constant homophily for the attribute “party membership”. Again, we distinguish six political parties; i.e. CD&V (the Christian Democrats), GROEN (the Green party), N-VA (the Flemish nationalist party), Open VLD (the Liberal party), Sp.a (the Social Democrats) and Vlaams Belang (the right-wing extremist party). In other words, we assess to what extent these parties “share” citizens they address or are addressed by. Based on the findings in Table 13, we acknowledge sub-networks along party lines are more likely to occur compared to connections across party lines. Again and for the aforementioned reasons (network size, relation type and the sampling method), the overall percentages in Table 13 are quite low (i.e. less than 10%).

Table 13 Probabilities for within-group and between-group ties based on ANOVA density models for politicians’ converted affiliation networks by period

	Period 1 (N= 229)	Period 2 (N= 215)	Period 3 (N= 133)	Period 4 (N= 88)
Intercept	2.51%	2.98%	2.41%	3.32%
In-group	4.68%***	6.49%***	8.07%***	3.61%***

The intercept presents the probability of ties across party lines, whereas in-group reflects the *increase* in the probability of ties between party members.

P1: Pre-election (25-04-14 to 18-05-14), P2: Prior week (19-05-14 to 24-05-14), P3: Election Day (25-05-14), P4: Post-election (26-05-14 to 01-06-14)

\*\*\*  $p < .001$

In line with the percentages presented in Table 12, the probability for in-group ties is significantly higher compared to ties across party lines. Hence, the inclusion of citizens confirms the aforementioned evidence in favour of Twitter’s network media logic; that is, interaction amongst like-minded users (Klinger & Svensson, 2014). Alike politicians, citizens define with whom they wish to interact, which is argued to contribute to the personalization of communication on social media (van Dijck & Poell, 2013).

Our findings are similar to a US study on the 2010 election debate, which showed the “*political discourse on Twitter remains highly partisan*” (Conover et al., 2011, p. 95). Another US study showed patterns of homophily as well as heterogeneity comparing Democrats’ and Republicans’ networks of followers and friends (Colleoni et al., 2014). Additional research is needed to confirm these tendencies, taking into account the different Twitter functionalities (such as friends or mention networks), the tone of the messages and the different political and media contexts.

### 3.2.5 Conclusion and discussion

This paper builds on recent conceptualizations of social media logic, emphasizing these platforms operate by distinct “rules” (Klinger & Svensson, 2014). In particular, we assess the de-centralization of communication between elites and non-elites and the selective nature of connections in Twitter communication networks. Applying quantitative social network analysis, we define the structural positions and practices that characterize political, media and citizen actors in four distinct periodical networks. The constellation of the different networks shows the prevalence of citizen actors. In this respect, we acknowledge Twitter’s role in the inclusion of previously invisible, non-elite voices. However, network positions and communicative practices show the distinction between elite and non-elite actors. Concerning elites, conventional practices that characterize these actors as institutions is reflected in their Twitter use. In particular, we refer to traditional mass media and their established routines and practices with respect to the selection and representation of news, tailored to mass audiences (Hjarvard, 2008; Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999; Strömbäck, 2008). The same goes for politicians, who are accustomed to communicate with the public via traditional media and in extension adapt to their routines and norms accordingly (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999; Strömbäck, 2008). Hence, from an elite perspective, citizens maintain their role as audiences, albeit online.

Further, we found more interaction between media and political actors (than what would be expected). More specifically, media actors’ attention for politicians increases up to Election Day, which can be related to the discussion of the election results. Politicians’ interactions with media decrease up to Election Day, which can indicate the use of Twitter to retrieve mass media attention as this allows them to reach wider audiences. Journalists use Twitter as an awareness system to get a sense of what is going on (online) (Hermida, 2010) and to cover politicians’ messages during election times (Broersma & Graham, 2012). More so, we also acknowledge traditional modes of communication (such as television or newspapers) are still important in Belgium, which is in accordance with a cross-national EU study on election campaigns (Lilleker et al., 2014).

The self-selective nature of communication on Twitter shows politicians connect to party members rather than rivals. This indicates the use of Twitter as a promotion tools during election times, as politicians can employ these platforms to endorse party members. In addition, taking into account the political context in Belgium, politicians might refrain from public debates with political opponents. In a party-centred system, coalition governments are formed, hence, competitors can become allies later. Concerning the affiliation networks of politicians and citizens, we equally acknowledge the self-selective nature of Twitter communication. Social media allow for the

construction of a personal news diet, based on one's interests and needs. Although we did not take into account the tone of the interactions between politicians and citizens, the tendencies towards connections along party lines show evidence in favour of an "activist" like mode of participation (Colleoni et al., 2014). In other words, politicians' online networks might not represent the "average", undecided voter, but rather reflects networks of sympathizers and supporters. We do acknowledge this is a tentative scenario which must remain open for further research.

In sum, Twitter's network logic interferes with conventional practices that characterize both media and political actors' relations with citizens. In short, this reflects the hybridity of contemporary media systems, in which "old" and "new" logics collide (Chadwick, 2013). However, the analytical distinction of the logic of social media (here: Twitter) provides added value for the study of our contemporary media environment and how it intervenes with politics. Nevertheless, we acknowledge further conceptual development is needed. In addition, a structural understanding of the debate provides a blueprint, which would benefit from additional research. In particular we highlight a content dimension, adding to the ties we formed and in extension, offline inquiry into the perceptions of each of the actor types about these network structures. In addition, the findings are contingent upon the specificities of the research context, i.e. election times, the Flemish media and political system and the specifics of our data collection method. Whereas we found little evidence of two-way interaction between politicians and citizens, other research has shown politicians most likely engage with citizens, compared to other actor types such as journalists (Graham, Broersma, & Hazelhoff, 2013; Larsson & Ihlen, 2015). These studies start from politicians' activities towards other actors, whereas we defined outgoing activity in relation to incoming activity. The diversity in methodological approaches adds to our understanding of the role of social media in the changing relations among political, media and citizen actors. Moreover, inferential-statistical social network analysis is still emerging within the field of Twitter research. In this respect, the use of SNA techniques and their applicability on Twitter interaction networks is yet to be fully explored.

### 3.3 Study III: What media logics are at play? Towards an alternative framework to study politicians' use of social media during election times

**D'heer, E (*in review*). What media logics are at play? Towards an alternative framework to study politicians' use of social media during election times**

Study III investigates how social media influence politicians' presentation of a favourable and attractive image towards voters. In this paper, we conceptualize a number of distinctive dimensions of social media logic and mass media logic, as well as interactions between social and mass media logic. This framework is applied on politicians' use of social media during election times.

Study III does not focus on behaviour only, as it aims to conceive politicians' aims and strategies with respect to the use of social media. Based on in-depth interviews with politicians and a content analysis of their Twitter and Facebook behaviour, we assess the perceived relevance and strategic adoption of the workings of social media and/or mass media. The results show politicians' social media use is predominantly tailored to the logic of mass media. However, the logic of social media becomes relevant when it intersects with mass media logic. Online popularity or virality is considered an alternative means for politicians to retrieve mass media coverage. Conventional news values as "contest" interact with irony and playfulness of social media messages, allowing politicians to gain visibility online and in the mass media.

Last, the findings from Study III resonate with Studies I and II, as politicians do not necessarily embrace social media's potential to engage in two-way communication with citizens. Further, politicians confirm the use of social media to generate visibility for themselves as well as party members. This resonates with the findings from Study II, showing communication runs *along* rather than *across* party lines.

#### 3.3.1 Introduction

Since the mid-1990s, the advent of the internet has been discussed in terms of its capacity to reshape political communication and its potential for the inclusion of citizens in election campaigns in novel ways (Coleman, 2005; Gibson & Cantijoch, 2011; Norris, 2000; Stromer-Galley, 2000). In a similar manner, social media have been understood and empirically assessed with respect to the possibilities for politicians to interact with citizens directly (Graham, Broersma, & Hazelhoff, 2013; Klingler, 2014; Larsson & Ihlen,

2015; Ross & Bürger, 2014). Overall, the findings show direct dialogue between politicians and citizens is limited, despite the affordances of social media to do so.

In this paper, we present the concept of “network media logic” (Klinger & Svensson, 2014) as an alternative framework to conceptualize and empirically assess politicians’ use of social media during election times. The concept of network media logic describes the specificities of content production and distribution on social media. It serves as an actualization of the concept of media logic, originally understood in relation to mass media (cf. Altheide & Snow, 1979).

The concept of media logic is already used to conceptualize and assess the interdependencies between politics and mass media (Esser, 2013; Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999; Strömbäck, 2008; Strömbäck & Esser, 2014a). However, the media landscape is profoundly changing. As Chadwick (2013) has convincingly argued, media systems to date are “hybrid”, characterized by the interplay of traditional media and newer, online media. The conceptual framework presented in this paper outlines a number of relevant dimensions of the logic of social media, including intersections with as well as distinctions from mass news media.

Following, we empirically assess politicians’ use of social media to present a favourable and attractive image towards voters. In doing so, we take an *actor-centric* perspective on media influence (Schulz, 2014). This implies that politicians anticipate and adapt to the workings of the media in order to use them for their own benefit. Since we account for the hybrid character of contemporary media systems, we assess social media use in relation to the workings of social media *and* mass media. Politicians might use social media to get attention from journalists and retrieve mass media coverage.

Via in-depth interviews and a content analysis of politicians’ behaviour on Twitter and Facebook during election times, we assess (1) politicians’ perceived need to integrate the workings of mass and/or social media and (2) politicians’ understanding of the workings of mass and/or social media.

### **3.3.2 Theoretical framework**

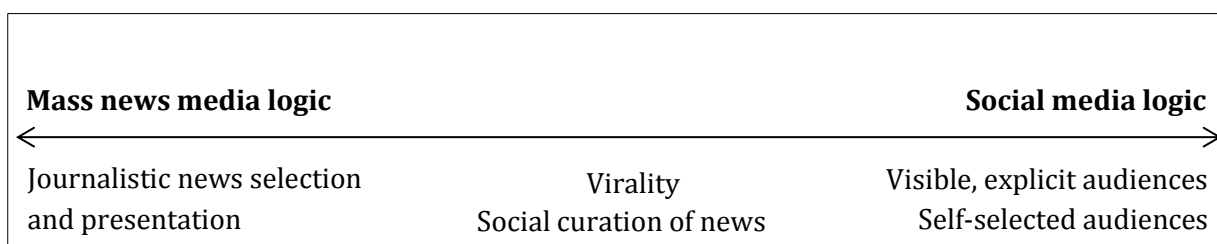
#### **The co-evolution of older and newer media logics**

Strömbäck and Van Aelst (2013) argue that politicians are more likely to adapt to the logic of mass media in “the electoral arena” (Sjöblom, 1968). During elections, politicians wish to reach and convince as many voters as possible. Both social media and mass

media provide the possibilities to do so. More so, both platforms and their logics interact.

In Figure 5 below, we account for the co-evolution of older and newer logics in contemporary hybrid news ecology (Chadwick, 2013). The continuum presents dimensions that are predominantly linked to mass news media (e.g. journalistic news selection) or social media (e.g. self-selected audiences), as well as intersections (e.g. virality).

Figure 5 A continuum from mass media logic to social media logic



Our conceptual framework provides a non-exhaustive, yet relevant number of dimensions of mass news media and social media regarding politicians' aim to reach voters and obtain a favourable image. Below, we discuss how the respective dimensions can influence politicians' use of social media. Our outline serves to structure the empirical work presented in this paper. With respect to the logic of social media, we draw from Klinger and Svensson's (2014) "network media logic", but we also extend their work and integrate related literature. We refer to the logic of social media, using the term "social media logic" as it fits with our empirical analysis of the social media platforms Twitter and Facebook.

### **Negotiating newsworthiness**

Since politicians wish to reach large audiences during election times, we can assume that they will tailor some of their social media activity towards journalists. This coincides with the changing nature of journalism and the integration of social media, and Twitter in particular, in the newsroom. Research has shown political journalists incorporate Twitter in their routines to keep up with campaign developments during elections (Parmelee, 2013a; Rogstad, 2013). Broersma & Graham (2012) studied UK and Dutch newspapers' use of Twitter as a source during election times. The findings indicate British newspapers cover politicians' "bad practices" on Twitter and messages that fit the conflict frame (e.g. whereby one politician attacks another). In addition, coverage in the Netherlands shows most attention goes to the more prominent politicians. In short, professional journalistic reporting is reflected in the selection of events, based on news values (cf. Galtung & Ruge, 1965) (Esser, 2013).

## **Going viral**

Getting attention on social media is distinct from getting attention in traditional media. Klinger and Svensson (2014) argue that politicians need to go viral in order to retrieve visibility on social media. This entails dependency on their online connections (and their connections' connections). It is users' collective endeavour (of likes, shares or retweets) that determines how communication flows and what is considered popular (Klinger & Svensson, 2014). In addition, successful storytelling on social media does not take the form of neutral and objective reporting, but contains affective and emotional elements (Papacharissi & de Fatima Oliveira, 2012). Hence, politicians will have to present their messages accordingly.

In Figure 5 above, virality is situated between mass news media and social media logic. It occurs on social media but it can also affect journalists' news selection practices. In particular, Twitter's trending topics feature is used by journalists to sense what users are talking about on the platform (Tandoc & Vos, 2015). Further, online popularity (in the form of shares, likes or other) is used by journalists to account for the significance of social media events or users (Paulussen & Harder, 2014). In addition, viral content can be boosted online once again, if it is covered by the mass media (Klinger & Svensson, 2014).

## **The social curation of news content**

Research has shown news is increasingly consumed and distributed via social networks (Hermida, Fletcher, Korell, & Logan, 2012). Social media users judge what traditional media content is valuable, interesting or entertaining for themselves as well as the users they are connected to (Klinger & Svensson, 2014; Singer, 2014; Villi, 2012). Therefore, social curation is situated between mass news media logic and social media logic in Figure 5.

Villi (2012) presents the concept of "social curation", as reflective of social media users' endeavours to engage with mass media content online. Whereas the concept is reflective of changing audience practices, politicians can equally employ social media to curate news content by sharing, re-distributing or re-assessing news items in line with their strategic motives. Enli and Skogerbø (2013, p. 767) found that politicians use social media to share their interpretations of news content, providing "a personal angle" to the story. Further, politicians also use social media to redistribute news items in which they are covered (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013; Klinger, 2014).



## **Visible, explicit audiences**

Whereas mass media audiences are invisible and dispersed, social media messages are addressed to a network of users that is explicit and visible (Schmidt, 2014). In particular, we refer to explicit and visible audience feedback. Feedback comes in the form of aggregated audience metrics (such as shares, likes or retweets) as well as comments, replies or questions that are directly and publically addressed to politicians, for example via the use of @reply messages on Twitter.

Social media are “filled with numbers” (Grosser, 2014). Both Facebook and Twitter quantify audience behaviour and provide politicians with personalized popularity reports. We argue that metrics as message reach, shares or retweets can serve as a guide for future behaviour. These metrics “teach” politicians what content and presentation techniques work online, hence, allow them to retrieve visibility and likeability.

Further, audiences become visible through the comments and questions they address to politicians. Unlike mass media, social media allow users to send messages directly to politicians. Therefore, social media have been understood and assessed with respect to their potential for a dialogue between politicians and citizens (e.g. Graham et al., 2013; Klinger, 2014; Ross & Bürger, 2014). However, it does not necessarily make sense for politicians to respond directly to individual comments, as during election times, politicians wish to reach a larger public (Strömbäck & Van Aelst, 2013).

## **Audience selectivity and reach**

As Klinger and Svensson (2014) argue, social media content is subject to selective exposure and fragmented audiences, including like-minded peers. Compared to mass media, audience reach on social media is limited and fragmented. Further, politicians do not control their own audiences. Users themselves decide whether or not they want to follow a politician on Twitter or like a politician’s page on Facebook. This implies that politicians are more likely to interact with their network of supporters, rather than addressing undecided voters. Research has shown politicians mainly interact with their own follower base, rather than beyond their personal network (Larsson & Ihlen, 2015).

### **3.3.3 Research design**

As outlined below, we take a “small data” approach (Stephansen & Couldry, 2014) to Twitter and Facebook, using qualitative interviews and a close reading of politicians’ online behaviour.

## **Participant selection**

This study includes 19 politicians running for the 2014 federal elections in Belgium. Since the late 1960s, Belgian political parties and traditional media are organized along regional lines, i.e. Flanders (ca. 6 million inhabitants) and Wallonia (ca. 4 million inhabitants). Consequently, the federal elections result in two separate election campaigns. In this study, we include Dutch speaking candidates (i.e. from Flanders). Based on the models of media and politics that Hallin and Mancini (2004) distinguish, Belgium represents a democratic corporatist model. Moreover, Belgium's party system is highly fragmented, which inevitably leads to coalition governments. Hence, competitors are also potential coalition partners. The corporatist model significantly differs from the liberal models of the US and Britain, which are often discussed in political communication research (Strömbäck & Dimitrova, 2011).

Voting is mandatory in Belgium and is based on candidate lists, organised per electoral district (of which Flanders counts six). This implies that, per party, citizens can vote for the list (and agree with the sequence of the names) or vote for specific candidates on the list (and potentially alter the sequence of the names). Six Flemish parties are represented in all six electoral districts in Flanders. The party names and respective ideologies are the following: CD&V (the Christian Democrats), GROEN (the Green party), N-VA (the Flemish nationalist party), Open VLD (the Liberal party), Sp.a (the Social Democrats) and Vlaams Belang (the right-wing extremist party).

By means of "purposive sampling" (Patton, 2002), we selected our participants. In total, 58 candidates were contacted, of which 19 agreed for the collection of their social media data and in-depth interviews. First, we selected candidates with a Facebook and Twitter account. It is worth noting that these politicians manage their own social media presence, albeit with encouragement and some guidance from the party. Second, concerning party affiliation, the parties and districts are represented relative to their respective sizes; N-VA (4), Open VLD (4), S.pa (4), CD&V (3), Vlaams Belang (2), Groen (2). Third, in terms of political function, the sample includes both higher-profile candidates (e.g. former ministers and members of the Flemish parliament) and lower-profile candidates (e.g. members of the provincial and municipal councils). Related, both incumbent and non-incumbent candidates are included. They all occupy places ranging from one to four on the candidate lists. Last, we opted for diversity in age (ranging from 30 to 59, average 43) and gender (13 males and 6 females).

The variety in the participants' profiles does not imply the generalizability of the findings, but serves to obtain diversity in interpretations and practices. We include participants' age, gender and party membership when using their quotes in the results section.

## **In-depth interviews with politicians**

The 19 semi-structured interviews were conducted in April 2014, as politicians were no longer available during the final weeks of the campaign up to Election Day, 25 May 2014. The interviews started with questions concerning politicians' interest in and use of social media as part of the communication mix employed during election times. Following, we elaborate on the incentives and evaluation of social media as tools to reach voters and present a favourable image of the self. We interpret what politicians describe as "appropriate behaviour" on social media and to what extent they adapt or why they don't.

The interviews lasted about one hour and were executed face-to-face, except for three politicians who were unable to meet in person. For these politicians, we conducted interviews by Skype, with the additional benefit of enabling the visual in the interview setting as well as text messaging elicitation material. The interviews were analysed using NVivo, computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS). We assessed and coded the data in an iterative fashion, reflecting the interplay of inductive and deductive coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We used our conceptual work on media logic, social media logic and political logic to analyse the interviews. Below we discuss the analysis of politicians' social media behaviour, which mainly functions to support the interview data.

## **Social media data collection and analysis**

Social media data collection is "actor-based" (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2012) as we start from the candidates' Twitter and Facebook accounts to collect messages. In line with our research focus, data collection took place during the election campaign (i.e. approximately four weeks before Election Day). More specifically, data was collected from the 23th of April until the 28th of May, with Election Day being the 25th.

Twitter and Facebook data collection is based on the platforms' respective APIs. For Twitter, the Streaming API allows us to capture tweets from our sample of 19 politicians using the open-source tool *yourTwapperKeeper* (Bruns, 2012). Following this procedure, we collected a corpus of 1273 tweets. For Facebook, two applications were used to collect data, i.e. *Digital Footprints* (<http://digitalfootprints.dk/>) and *Netvizz* (Rieder, 2013). This is related to Facebook's restrictions on data collection, and related, the restrictions of these applications. Via the *Digital Footprints* website, we were able to retrieve data from politicians' personal profiles with their consent. Since *Digital Footprints* limits the number of participants we can track, we used *Netvizz* to collect data from politicians' public pages. In case of multiple Facebook profiles and/or pages (which was often the case), politicians provided their most used channel to

communicate with the broader public. In total, we collected 977 Facebook posts and comments.

Both Twitter and Facebook combined, we collected 2250 messages (i.e. tweets, posts and comments). There is great variation between candidates' level of activity on social media, as the average number of messages sent is 118 (ranging from 24 to 381), with a standard deviation of 100 messages. Given our small sample size and the great variation in activity between the participants, the data mainly support and enrich the interview data. In general, social media data complicate the existing boundaries between quantitative and qualitative methods. This has resulted in studies that draw from big samples, but apply qualitative analyses (e.g. Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013), as well as small sample approaches that apply quantitative and mixed approaches, as is the case here (e.g. Marwick & boyd, 2011; Stephansen & Couldry, 2014).

Based on an iterative coding process, drawing from the literature (Graham, Broersma, Hazelhoff, et al., 2013; Klinger, 2014; Larsson, 2015; Mirer & Bode, 2015; Parmelee & Bichard, 2012) as well as the data, we defined the following seven overarching content codes: (1) Campaigning activities, (2) Policy-related material, (3) Distributing mass media content (in which the politician/party is covered), (4) Criticizing mass media, rival parties or other, (5) Replies to critics, (6) Thanking voters/supporters, (7) Practical news about the elections (i.e. non-ideological content) and (8) non-political content. Further, we assessed the use "functional operators" on Twitter: addressing/mentioning (via @), indexing (via #) and hyperlinking (via http://) (Thimm, Dang-Anh, & Einspänner, 2014). On Facebook, we distinguished between posts and comments and assessed the use of hyperlinks.

### **3.3.4 Results**

#### **Anticipating mass media coverage: Balancing controversy**

Our participants are well aware that journalists are among their Twitter audience. Literature has shown that Twitter influences journalistic sourcing and selection practices (Broersma & Graham, 2012; Parmelee, 2013a; Ross & Bürger, 2014). Politicians anticipate news coverage by adapting the content and style of their Twitter messages to appeal to journalists. More specifically, they argue that some level of "controversy or confrontation" is needed to reach the media.

The content analysis shows critique and response to critique is common on Twitter (36%), whereas it is less present on Facebook (11%) (See also Larsson, 2015). Further, critique is mostly uttered at rival parties (73%) and reflects ideological aspects as well

as other parties' campaigning strategies. Simultaneously, politicians wish to refrain from too stringent statements. As a female candidate (42, the Christian Democrats) argued: *I need to be a little bit more blunt and outspoken on Twitter, without attacking or insulting people. Formulating captivating and witty messages is hard for me. That is a copy writer's job. Those people are trained for that. Some politicians do manage to one-liners as if it were nothing, but I don't.*

Politicians want to critically address the viewpoints of the political opponents, but they don't want to insult potential coalition partners as in party-centred systems as Belgium, competitors become allies. This shows in the ways they use the platform. Taking a closer look at the Twitter messages, we find replies (63.5%) and retweets (17.3%) to be most common. Politicians re-distribute critique on opponents that comes from higher-profile party members, opinion leaders or mass media (as independent watchdogs). In addition to these "indirect" forms of criticism, politicians use reply messages to debate with rival candidates as @replies move the conversation "to the more intimate micro layer" of Twitter (Bruns & Moe, 2014, p. 21). Reply messages have lower visibility and are more difficult to interpret independently from the larger discussion. In turn, this decreases potential controversy and bad publicity (in mass media) which might follow these online discussions.

### **Ancitipating mass media coverage: Virality as an alternative**

As the quote below shows, "going viral" is considered an alternative route to retrieve coverage in mass media.

*You need to be somewhat well-known to get your message across. When you are ranked number four on the election list, you know it's unlikely your tweets get picked up by journalists. Unless of course, you can go viral by being original and innovative on Twitter. (M, 33, the Flemish nationalist party)*

Politicians argue that virality can compensate for their lower profile (and related their lack of attention in the mass media). Research in the Netherlands has shown journalists often select the same politicians' tweets, whereas others are only covered once or twice (Broersma & Graham, 2012). Since higher-profile politicians are newsworthy because they are *elites*, lower-profile politicians can rely on platform popularity to get media coverage. The participant's reference to "original or innovative" content is further explained as *the use of a humorous tone*. On social media, information and news sharing often contains affective elements, such as humour (Papacharissi & de Fatima Oliveira, 2012). Humour can interact with criticism, as irony is a humorous, entertaining way of contesting other politicians' messages (Jungherr, 2014a).

Humorous and witty comments can also attract journalists because they allow for a punning and entertaining headline (Harcup & O'Neill, 2001; Parmelee, 2013b). Humour is not linked to political coverage in the same way that negativity or controversy is, but it is deemed relevant by our participants to retrieve mass media coverage.

Platform popularity is a product of the message content and social media users' engagement with the content. In this respect, another participant (M, 37) argued for the collective use of dedicated hashtags during offline events (e.g. party congresses) amongst party members. This collective effort is aimed at "*making the hashtag trending*" which in turn raises awareness about the event. This participant is a member of the right-wing extremist party 'Vlaams Belang'. During the interview he denounced the party's lack of attention in mass media. In Belgium, mass media limit the party's media presence, applying a *cordon mediatique*, which is an extension of the other parties' agreement not to cooperate with 'Vlaams Belang' (*cordon sanitaire*) (De Cleen, 2010). The politician argues the party congress might get coverage as journalists rely on Twitter's trending topics do get an idea of what users talk about on the platform (Tandoc & Vos, 2015).

### **The social media – mass media cycle: The social curation of content**

In addition to the use of Twitter to retrieve media coverage, politicians also re-distribute and discuss news items. Based on the content analysis, we found that both Twitter (T) and Facebook (F) are used to share mass media content (T: 14%, F: 14%). In addition, taking a closer look at the hyperlinks shared in politicians' messages, we find three dominant categories; that is, mass media content (T: 31%, F: 45%), party/personal social media content (T: 24%, F: 26%) and party/personal websites (T: 23%, F: 30%). Both Twitter and Facebook are used as "hubs" to connect with mass media content, social media content (e.g. YouTube campaign clips) and articles on party/personal websites. These hyperlinks are related to a variety of content categories such as campaign reports or policy-related information. In sum, we encounter the curation of mass media content, social media content and content coming from political websites.

Concerning mass media content in particular, we find that politicians extend news coverage about themselves or party members. Further, they wish to share news that aligns with the party program and ideology or as previously mentioned, use mass media content to contest statements from rival politicians.

Politicians' social media comments and interpretations of mass media content might be relevant for journalists to produce *follow-up stories*. In particular, one of the participants (M, 59, the Green party) argued *quick comments closely linked to the political news of the day* are relevant for journalists to cover: *I received calls from*

*journalists quite often based on tweets I sent out. No later than the day after, I am covered in the newspaper. The circle is complete.*

Since news needs to be recent and topical, timing is considered an important aspect (in addition to the previously discussed styling elements such as humour or controversy). Whereas politicians can proactively use timing in their favour, they are equally susceptible to the intensified and accelerated political communication cycle (Serazio, 2015). This is well presented in the quote below, coming from a lower-profile politician who joined Twitter a few months before the elections and was amongst the least active users in our sample:

*Sometimes I think it can't get more intense. My fear is that communication gets very ephemeral, that we basically don't remember what happened in the morning. I am a little bit cautious about the impact on the political debate and political action. (M, 51, the Flemish nationalist party)*

### **Visible, explicit audiences: Negotiating the goldfish and justifying the lack of interactivity**

Politicians report that social media allow them to present an accessible and “ordinary” self. However, most of our participants were reluctant to reveal their private lives. The close reading of their messages showed very little evidence of their non-professional lives (e.g. pictures of friends and family). On Facebook, 10% of the messages were non-political and on Twitter, only 6% of the messages were non-political. However, politicians do acknowledge that personal content generates more feedback (e.g. likes, shares or comments). This is exemplified by the quote below:

*Most of my Facebook posts are about politics. I avoid posting personal stuff. I'll share a picture of a goldfish, but that's it. It is a bit strange that posting a goldfish generates so many comments and likes. I guess it makes me more human or something. On the other hand, if you only look at message reach, you are very limited in what you can share. After all, I am a politician, and although some posts are indeed playful and popular, it does not mean you can't post anything else. (F, 42, the Christian Democrats)*

Politicians can rely on popularity metrics to guide future behaviour, but do not feel as if they have to. In order to appear more familiar and in touch with voters (cf. “Humanization”, Holtz-Bacha, 2004), politicians use social media for campaigning updates, including “peeks behind the scenes”. The latter tell the story of the life of a politician during election times, often supported by picture material (e.g. the preparation of particular offline campaign events) (see also Larsson, 2015). Visual

content is considered to be preferred over textual content, *as photo posts generate more likes and comments* (M, 37, the right-wing extremist party). Campaign updates is a content category that is abundant on Twitter (22.6%) and even more so on Facebook (32.8%), although it is acknowledged to generate less traction than “the goldfish” and related personal stories.

In addition to audience feedback in terms of aggregates, politicians are equally confronted with critique, comments or questions from individual users. Whereas politicians do not always feel like responding, they spontaneously justify their lack of interaction on social media, thereby confirming it defines as appropriate and expected behaviour. Overall, politicians agree that they can ignore citizen comments if they are insulting. Participants do make an effort to respond to substantial policy-related issues, campaigning practicalities and acknowledgements of supporters or voters.

On Twitter, discussions with citizens often include other actors, such as opinion leaders or journalists (via a multi-turn @reply chain). The inclusion of these established actors provides an extra incentive for politicians to interact. Further, it was argued that responding to non-established users that have a lot of followers is more productive, compared to users that have limited visibility. However, not all politicians are that strategic. Some participants state they try to respond some messages (e.g. one out of two). This reduces the load but still allows them to present an accessible image. The more enthusiastic and active social media users find it less cumbersome to debate with their followers and engage in what can be defined as an *animated discussion* (F, 35, the Flemish nationalist party).

### **Audience selectivity and targetability**

Social media content is subject to selective exposure and fragmented audiences, and in particular; like-minded peers (Klinger & Svensson, 2014). Our participants indeed acknowledge that their networks of friends and followers on Twitter and Facebook contain a lot of colleague-politicians. More so, 34% of the Twitter messages that cover campaigning updates, contains mentions to party members (see also Plotkowiak & Stanoevska-Slabeva, 2013; Thimm et al., 2014). On Facebook, 23% of the campaign updates contains references to party members. Party members rely on each other to increase their visibility on social media.

In addition to party members, politicians’ networks also include sympathizers and supporters. As one of the interviewees stated: *Social media are for a large part in-crowd* (F, 35, the Flemish nationalist party). For Twitter in particular, “in-crowd” reflects the type of users that are present. Twitter is conceived as a political arena in which



politicians (both colleagues and rivals), journalists, pundits and experts have their place. In short, politicians argue these people already know who to vote for.

In comparison, Facebook networks are more diverse and closer to what politicians define as “common people” (i.e. non-elite and non-expert). Related, Facebook is understood as a “friendly space” (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013), due to its use as a campaigning tool as well as a platform for personal contact with friends and family. As such (and even more so than Twitter), it contains supporters and sympathizers. Simultaneously, a large network of supporters can assist in the spread of politicians’ messages. As one interviewee (M, 36, the Liberal party) stated: *On Facebook, you can ‘rally the base’. If at least some of the 1000 users that read your post, tell their friends, the friends of your friends might start following your activity. That way you can reach a quite substantial amount of people.*

Facebook, as a company, equally provides politicians with means to get beyond the first circle of friends. Politicians that own a Facebook fan page can “boost posts” so they become visible beyond their personal fan base, based on self-defined audience characteristics.<sup>3</sup> Fan pages are distinct from personal profiles, as they provide insights on page visitors (such as demographics) and the posted messages (such as reach and shares).<sup>4</sup> Audience demographics are a valuable addition to the behavioural statistics social media provide. Our participants particularly point to the geographical demarcation of the audience, which is related to the organization of the elections in Belgium via voting districts. Hence, politicians tap into the quantification and commercialization of user behaviour on Facebook to target very specific audiences that go beyond their personal fan base. These are very modest signs of what Tufekci (2014b) defines as “computational politics”, which opens a new range of questions on data access, surveillance and privacy.

### **3.3.5 Conclusion and discussion**

#### **Findings and contributions**

This study interpreted politicians’ use of social media from a media logic perspective. As Klinger and Svensson (2014, p. 1242) argue, the concept of “network media logic” allows to understand transformations in political communication “*without resorting to either technological determinism or normalization*”. Our conceptual framework (see Figure 5)

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/business/help/547448218658012/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/help/336143376466063/>

outlined a number of dimensions that are reflective of the logic of mass media and social media, as well as intersections between them. Based on our interview data and a close reading of politicians' messages, we were able to assess to what extent politicians acknowledge and act upon these dimensions in line with their own goals.

The results show politicians predominantly tailor to the logic of mass media and the intersections of mass and social media logic, whereas they acknowledge but do not necessarily adopt the workings of social media. Hence, it is not social media *or* mass media, but the interaction between both we need to account for.

In order to retrieve mass media coverage, politicians rely on conventional mechanisms such as controversy and contest. Further, the intersecting dimensions of mass media and social media are considered as *alternative* means for politicians to retrieve coverage. In particular, platform popularity (i.e. virality) makes up for the fact that politicians themselves might not be relevant enough for journalists. Jungherr's (2014a, p. 254) analysis of political tweets confirms that "*popular retweets show evidence of a hybrid media logic*", meaning that conventional news values as "contest" interact with irony and playfulness. However, not all politicians are skilled to write captivating, witty and humorous messages that engage a large number of users. Hence, they might acknowledge these possibilities, but are not necessarily able to perform them.

Journalists and politicians watch *each other* on social media. Politicians' social media use shows references to the news of the day. Using both Twitter and Facebook, politicians share, comment and re-use mass media content according to their personal preferences. These activities are reactive and proactive in the sense they might result in news coverage once again. Further, politicians curate their own and colleague-politicians' *online* presence as well (see also Graham et al., 2013), making reference to other social media platforms or websites. Social media's possibilities for networked content curation, in addition to content creation, are embraced and employed.

Audience feedback in terms of social media metrics as well as individual comments are recognized but integrated only to a limited extent. This is expressive of the relative importance of social media, when their workings do *not* intersect with mass media.

A picture showing politicians' personal life is acknowledged to be more popular than a campaign update. Yet, it is the latter that is selected over the former. Studies have shown that politicians employ Facebook to provide insight in their personal lives (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013; Larsson, 2015), whereas others provide mixed evidence (Ross & Bürger, 2014). Concerning Twitter, our findings resonate with a UK study, showing only 6% of the tweets were personal (Graham et al., 2013). Further, our participants

acknowledge, but not necessarily embrace dialogue with citizens. As Enli and Skogerbø (2013, p. 770) found, “*idealistic motivations*” of dialogue are higher than what politicians “*manage to manoeuvre in practice*”.

In Belgium, the fairly small electoral districts offer incentives for personal contact and local relations as well. In addition, we acknowledge traditional modes of communication (such as television or newspapers) are still important in Belgium, which is in accordance with a cross-national EU study on election campaigns (Lilleker et al., 2014). Further, politicians’ search for controversy and contest is tempered by Belgium’s multi-party system and a political culture characterized by compromise. In addition, news media coverage during elections in Belgium, a country with a well-funded public service broadcaster, shows a balance between substantial information and politics as conflict and confrontation (Strömbäck & Aelst, 2010).

## **Limitations and future avenues**

In closing, we mention a number of limitations of our study in combination with the presentation of future avenues for research. First, we acknowledge the findings presented here are not generalizable to (Belgian) politicians and are tied to the media and political context of Belgium (which is very different from the UK and US for example). Further, we gauged the *perceived* need and impact of social media, but we cannot say to what extent politicians’ activities towards journalists and/or voters had an effect on the election results.

Our conceptual framework built on the work of Klinger and Svensson (2014), who argue that social media content is created and shared based on personal relevance (rather than journalistic values) and is distributed via like-minded networks with selective exposure. However, social media equally have specific techno-economic dimensions. As briefly touched upon in the results section, platforms as Facebook allow politicians to buy user data for political advertising. In this respect, van Dijck and Poell (2013) define “datafication” as a key principle of social media. The quantification and commercialization of user data allows for personalized advertising. Further, they argue that platform popularity (or virality) is not solely a product of users’ interactions with social media messages, but is equally influenced by the platforms’ algorithms. The latter actively prioritize some users or messages over others, making popular content even more popular. The economic aspects of social media need to be integrated in the framework, especially if we evolve towards more strategic and target-driven use of social media by politicians.

Whereas some of our participants were very active and quite confident about their social media activity, others showed very limited activity and less (perceived) savviness.

As such, we argue for the inclusion of platform-related variables to understand politicians' social media use, in addition to ideology, candidate rank, party size (and other). Concerning Twitter for example, experience on the platform (rather than party age or personal variables as gender) is found to be a relevant predictor of activity (Vergeer & Hermans, 2013).

Last, and as Jungherr (2014a, p. 255) argues: "*the mapping of the emerging hybrid media systems is still in its very early stages*". More empirical work is needed on the intersections between mass media and social media to understand the evolving dynamics of the relation between politics and media.

### 3.4 Study IV: @THEVIEWER: Analysing the offline and online impact of a dedicated conversation manager in the newsroom of a public broadcaster

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Study IV investigates journalists' use of social media and in particular, their potential to alter journalists' relation with their audiences. Alike Study III, we combine online behaviour with in-depth interviews.

The study is centred on the appointment of a “dedicated conversation manager” at the newsroom. This function was created at the public broadcaster VRT and epitomizes their efforts toward journalism as a two-way process. A journalist working for the current affairs debate program ‘Terzake’ was selected to execute this job. The purpose of this study is two-fold. First, we assess the impact of the conversation manager on the Twitter debate. Second, we assess the impact of the tweeting viewer in the newsroom via in-depth interviews and a newsroom inquiry. In line with the previous studies, we draw from Bourdieu's field approach and the concept of social media logic to understand how journalists' behaviour and routines interact with the workings of social media.

The findings show the conversation manager facilitates the debate, but does not get involved in the discussion amongst the tweeting viewers. His Twitter activity shows the online extension of journalistic norms and practices. However, based on the newsroom inquiry, we find that audiences' social media behaviour can supplement news judgment. The tweeting viewer predominantly impacts journalistic practices as an aggregate; that is, in terms of social media metrics (e.g. retweets). This study adds to Studies I and II as the impact of social media on the relation between mass media and their audiences is not necessarily visible online.

#### **3.4.I Introduction**

Audiences adopt social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook to comment on programs and interact with other audience members or even producers or the cast of programs (Harrington, Highfield, & Bruns, 2013; Highfield et al., 2013; Wohn & Na, 2011; Wood & Baughman, 2012). Within the newsroom, these platforms can serve as a

bridge between news producers and consumers, reflecting the development of journalism toward “*an opening up of the conversation*” (Deuze & Fortunati, 2011, p. 167). In this article, we investigate the impact of a conversation manager at the Flemish public service broadcaster (PSB) VRT. In essence, and as we will argue below, the appointment of a dedicated conversation manager intends to construct an interactive and mutually beneficial relation between the program makers of the current affairs debate program ‘Terzake’ and its viewing audience. This function was created only recently at the VRT and epitomizes the newsroom’s efforts toward journalism as a two-way process. In this respect, it fits within a broader variety of initiatives under the labels collaborative and participatory journalism (Canter, 2013; Domingo et al., 2008).

Regarding the appointment of the conversation manager, it is fruitful to recall the Twitter quarrel instigating this decision. During one episode, a tweeting viewer questioned the journalistic relevance of the program by comparing it to a Flemish tabloid magazine. Although critique is not uncommon and usually ignored, this time, the program makers told the respective user to find another waste of his time. Both on Twitter and in the mass media, this quarrel was framed as a “bad communication practice” and ‘Terzake’ was denounced for its arrogance (for which it apologized later).<sup>5</sup> The case is illustrative of the challenges social media bring forth, as the news production process can be interrupted continuously and publically by non-elite actors (Chadwick, 2013). Nevertheless, scholars have observed the continuing nature of conventional journalistic practices in relation to audience material in the newsroom (Domingo et al., 2008; Singer, 2005; Tandoc, 2014). On the other hand, audience feedback in the form of web metrics is found to influence news selection practices (Anderson, 2011; Tandoc, 2014).

The case study we present here combines offline data (via newsroom inquiry) and online data (via Twitter analysis), which to date have often been presented separately. The focus of our study is twofold, as we aim to understand (1) how the conversation manager impacts Twitter activity and concurrently (2) how the tweeting audience impacts newsroom practices. Related, our conceptual framework integrates mass media and social media logic within Bourdieu’s field framework.

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<sup>5</sup> (mtm) (2013, July 22). Misnoegde kijkers en makers Terzake ruzieën op Twitter [Program makers bickering with their viewers on Twitter]. *Het Nieuwsblad*. Retrieved from <http://nieuwsblad.be>

### 3.4.2 Theoretical framework

#### **The interrelation between the tweeting audience and the journalistic field**

Concerning the rise of social media in relation to PSBs, van Dijck and Poell (2014) discuss tensions related to the encounter of “the social” and “the public.” In short, the latter refers to the institutional mission and derived journalistic practices, while the former refers to social media platforms and their logic. Below, we highlight relevant literature on the journalistic field, mass media logic and social media logic in the light of the phenomenon we are studying.

The article departs from journalism as a social institution, by emphasizing its relation to other fields in society (Shoemaker & Reese, 2013). The internal workings of the journalistic field are described by concepts such as news media logic (Esser, 2013; Hallin & Mancini, 2004) and “journalistic doxa” and habitus (Schultz, 2007; Tandoc, 2014). Hallin and Mancini (2004) define professional aspects of news media logic, which entail the distinct norms journalists adhere to for selecting material, double-checking sources, determining news value and objectivity and neutrality from the political field. In particular, the journalistic judgment of newsworthiness is understood as a doxa (Schultz, 2007); that is, an enduring convention that is tacit and undisputed within the field (Bourdieu, 2005). Studies on the integration of audience contributions in the newsroom suggest that journalists accept and embrace audience material (Domingo et al., 2008; Jönsson & Örnebring, 2011), although it is still subject to traditional journalistic practices (Chung, 2007; Domingo, 2008; Hermida & Thurman, 2008).

Early ethnographic research has shown that journalists ignore, if not reject, feedback from the audience (e.g. Gans, 1979). With the emergence of “audience information systems” (Napoli, 2011), audience feedback has become visible and measurable. Nowadays, online audience metrics are incorporated in the newsroom and alter journalistic norms and routines as editors seek to further increase web traffic (Tandoc, 2014). These audience metrics are grounded in the logic of “datafication”; that is, the facilitation of real-time feedback via aggregated analytics (e.g. the number of shares) (van Dijck & Poell, 2013). Linked to datafication, software algorithms reflect a key characteristic of new, digital media (Manovich, 2001). Computer algorithms enhance the asymmetrical nature of content distribution (and popularity), as a few messages receive a lot of attention and most remain unnoticed (Baym, 2013; Klinger & Svensson, 2014).

Besides online audience behaviour as aggregated measures, we understand “rapid responses” (Elmer, 2012) (e.g. via Twitter) to televised events as additional input in the accelerating news cycle (Chadwick, 2013). Hence, contributions of individual audience

members become visible. Klinger and Svensson (2014) understand the logic of content production on social media through concepts such as “produsage” (Bruns, 2008), which reflects news as an on-going process of evaluation and discussion; open to new participants in the debate. Domingo’s (2008) newsroom inquiries have shown journalists embrace this ideal (i.e. the inclusion of more non-elite voices in the debate), but do not necessarily put this into practice as the division between news production and interactivity management remains. In addition, scholars argue that social media users reflect a self-selected, hence, unrepresentative sample of the audience, let alone the general public (Baym, 2013; Klinger & Svensson, 2014; Napoli, 2011).

In short, we recognize both mass media logic and social media logic, as distinct yet interrelated principles. We rely on Bourdieu’s (1984, 1988) field theory to conceptualize the mutual adaption of the journalistic field (and its logic) and social media logic. Whereas the journalistic field has been discussed extensively (e.g. Benson & Neveu, 2005), the appropriation of field theory on web 2.0 (Song, 2010) and social network technologies in particular is still emerging (Papacharissi & Easton, 2013; D’heer & Verdegem, 2014). Bourdieu (1993) uses the metaphor of “refraction” to define how fields refract external influences (i.e. external logics) through their own logics. This metaphor emphasizes the indirect impact of external logics; hence, the impact of social media on the journalistic field is co-defined by the journalistic logic and vice versa. The combination of our two research questions, presented below, exemplifies our relational framework.

*RQ1: How does the presence and activity of the conversation manager impact communication patterns on Twitter?*

*RQ2: How does the tweeting audience, as internalized via the conversation manager, impact newsroom practices?*

### **3.4.3 Research design**

We depart from a case study approach in the sense that we provide a multi-faceted understanding of a purposefully selected phenomenon (Yin, 2009). The study focuses on the role, meaning and impact of a conversation manager in a single organization, more specifically the newsroom department of the Flemish PSB, VRT. In particular, we focus on the TV program ‘Terzake’, which is aired from Monday to Friday on the in-depth channel of the VRT, called ‘Canvas’. Since 1994, ‘Terzake’ covers debates and interviews with studio guests (mostly politicians) and news correspondents.



Although ‘Terzake’ attracts a relatively limited number of viewers (e.g. compared to the daily news bulletin), it has a lively and critical Twitter audience (as the Twitter quarrel illustrated). The tweeting viewer did not receive systematic attention until the editorial staff decided to “offer” one of its existing staff members to become a dedicated social media manager in charge of the promotion of the program and interaction with the audience via social media. To date, no other news and current affairs TV program has decided to equip its team with a conversation manager. In this respect, it is a pilot project, in exploration of the added value of interacting with the tweeting audience, but without specific goals or targets that need to be attained. Our fieldwork took place in December 2013, that is, about two months after the conversation manager was appointed. In addition, we rely on Twitter data reflecting the period before and after the appointment of the conversation manager.

Below, we outline the different information sources on which the description and understanding of our study is built. We combine in-depth interviews, participant-observations, and SNA of Twitter conversation on the program. We approach Twitter from “small data” perspective (Stephansen & Couldry, 2014) in which a mixed method approach allows the validation and contextualization of online behaviour.

### **Interviews and participant-observations in the newsroom**

Both semi-structured and open-ended interviews (i.e. “ethnographic interviews”, Tracy, 2013) were conducted. The semi-structured interviews cover the role of social media and the conversation manager in the newsroom. The interviews took place in the news department (albeit in a separate room) and lasted about 60–90 minutes. The open-ended interviews took place during the participatory observations in the newsroom and focus on the clarification of specific choices and practices. Hence, most of the time we talked with the conversation manager himself. In addition, the daily ‘Terzake’ crew consists of a managing editor, technical staff, and about four journalists of which one is the on-screen host of the program. We conducted interviews with the editor-in-chief and the program host. Furthermore, we interviewed the online news manager of the overall news department. To summarize, our four interviewees are relevant actors with distinct roles, positioned at different levels of the hierarchy but all situated within the same newsroom.

In our observer-as-participant role (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010), we attended editorial meetings, observed interactions in the newsroom (from and to the conversation manager in particular), and followed the conversation manager in his daily routines. In total, observations took place on two non-consecutive weekdays, chosen after negotiation with the editor-in-chief and based on the potential social media impact of the program’s topics. Observations took place from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. since the program

is aired live at 8 p.m. and the conversation manager also engages on social media after the program is aired. Given the limited observation period, our efforts predominantly serve to enrich the interviews and in extension, the conversation manager's online behaviour. In addition to the field notes, we retrieved additional data sources (Yin, 2009) such as internal guidelines for social media conduct, e-mail interaction with Twitter users, and print screens of their paid-for social media monitoring tool; that is, 'Engagor' (<https://engagor.com>).

The data sources were analysed using NVivo, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS). We analysed perceptions, practices, and actions in the light of the different logics we ascribed to the journalistic field and social media. We assessed and coded the data in an iterative fashion, reflecting the interplay of inductive and deductive coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In the text, we use abbreviations for interviewee identification (reflecting their first and last name), and if useful, we mention their professional function. Concretely, we define the conversation manager (N.V.), the online news manager for the entire newsroom (E.R.), the editor-in-chief (K.L.), and the program host (K.C.).

### **Network and user analysis of the Twitter debate on the program**

For the analysis of the social media data, we focus on Twitter as it is the predominant platform through which discussion on the program takes place. The program makers provide on-screen prompts of the dedicated hashtag '#TerzakeTV' and actively communicate through the official Twitter account '@TerzakeTV'. It is through the official Twitter account (which exists since 2012) that the conversation manager engages in the Twitter debate.

Data collection is based on the presence of the keyword 'TerzakeTV', which returns all messages *from* and *to* the '@TerzakeTV' Twitter account as well as Twitter messages that contain the official hashtag '#TerzakeTV'. Although this approach is not comprehensive, we study users that deliberately and publically associate themselves with the program, which is common practice in audience research on Twitter (Deller, 2011; Highfield et al., 2013; Wohn & Na, 2011). Based on this sample of Twitter messages, we constructed networks of users tweeting about 'Terzake'. We collected data during a 4-week period *before* the appointment of the dedicated conversation manager and a 4-week period *after*. Data collection occurred within the 2013 fall TV season and reflects 20 episodes per period. Hence, we cover 40 episodes in total.

Since we are particularly interested in the conversation part of the Twitter debate, the construction of the networks is built on a particular Twitter convention, that is, the use of the @-sign followed by the addressee's username. Papacharissi and De Fatima

Oliveira (2012) refer to this convention as an “addressivity marker,” which allows the user to communicate to a specific other user. These markers can be placed at the beginning of the message (i.e. a reply), within the message (i.e. a mention), or in the form of a retweet. We constructed networks for each of the specific conventions (i.e. mentions, replies, and retweets) as well as the combination of these conventions both before and after the appointment of the conversation manager, resulting in eight networks in total. We used the SNA software UCINET (Borgatti et al., 2002) to analyse the respective networks. Network analysis served to understand the changes in user activity as well as the relative position of the program’s official account (i.e. ‘@TerzakeTV’) after the appointment of the conversation manager. The measures are clarified throughout the discussion of the results.

Furthermore, we provide user insights for the reply, mention, and retweet networks before and after the conversation manager. More specifically, Twitter users were coded into four categories, which serve to enrich our understanding of the respective networks as well as the interview data. The four user categories we defined are the following: (1) politicians and political parties; (2) media and journalists; (3) opinion leaders; that is, people that have been staged in traditional media for their expertise and professional opinion at least once; and (4) non-established/non-affiliated users, that is, users that are not part of a news organization/formally affiliated with a political party. We relied on the users’ public profile data to categorize the actors. Similar user categories and a similar coding procedure have been applied in a study on Austria’s public Twittersphere (Ausserhofer & Maireder, 2013). In our study, the first and the third user category reflect actors that are staged in the program, while the second category reflects colleagues or competing journalists who are promoted or involved in the discussion. The fourth category best fits the non-elite voices with whom ‘Terzake’ wishes to build an interactive and mutually beneficent relation.

### **3.4.4 Results**

#### **The appointment of the conversation manager and his impact on the Twitter debate**

Notwithstanding the business-oriented feel of the function title, a former journalist within the newsroom was appointed for the job (and not an external professional within the field of social media and communication management). Acquaintance with the TV program and, in extension, an understanding of “the journalistic game” (Schultz, 2007) are perceived to be very important. Concerning socio-demographics and personal characteristics, Tandoc (2014) found that age, self-thought skills and interest co-define involvement with digital audience metrics in the newsroom. Here also, we are dealing

with a young male journalist, who has some basic technical skills (e.g. cutting parts of a video fragment to include them in Twitter messages) and interest in/affiliation with social media. Whereas the other journalists in the newsroom have a Twitter account and consult it in relation to their journalistic work, the conversation manager is the one proactively promoting the program and reacting to questions and thoughts uttered via social media. Journalist and program host K.C. suggests the following:

*I cannot and will not engage with every question or remark that is uttered on Twitter. I don't consider this to be part of my tasks as a program host. I have discussed this with N.V. [the conversation manager]. Moreover, the editor-in-chief of the VRT news department expressed a similar attitude.*

In this respect, we acknowledge the “segregated integration” of social media in the newsroom, as practices are centred around the conversation manager rather than being rolled out in the newsroom (see also Domingo, 2008). On a more strategic level, the conversation manager contributes to the VRT’s general endeavour *to enlarge the digital footprint* (E.R., online news manager for the entire news department). This aim is reactive to the changing media landscape and consumption patterns, such as the use of mobile internet devices. As E.R. further explains: *It is our duty to inform the Flemish population. If they are consuming content via Twitter and Facebook, then that is where we need to be.*

In the first part of the results section, we focus on the conversation manager’s footprint on Twitter as we discuss user activity before and after his appointment. Since the appointment of the conversation manager, the overall conversation network grew substantially. The number of users increased with 44% and the number of ties (i.e. connections between two users) with 65%. More specifically, 660 additional users entered the conversation and 3198 additional connections were found between the tweeting viewers, resulting in a network of 2145 unique users and 8103 connections.

Below, we distinguish between outgoing user activity (i.e. sending messages) and incoming user activity (i.e. receiving messages). The overall growth in network size is discussed along these two lines because we constructed *directed* Twitter networks. A directed Twitter network distinguishes between the users that *address* other users and the users that *are addressed* by other users.

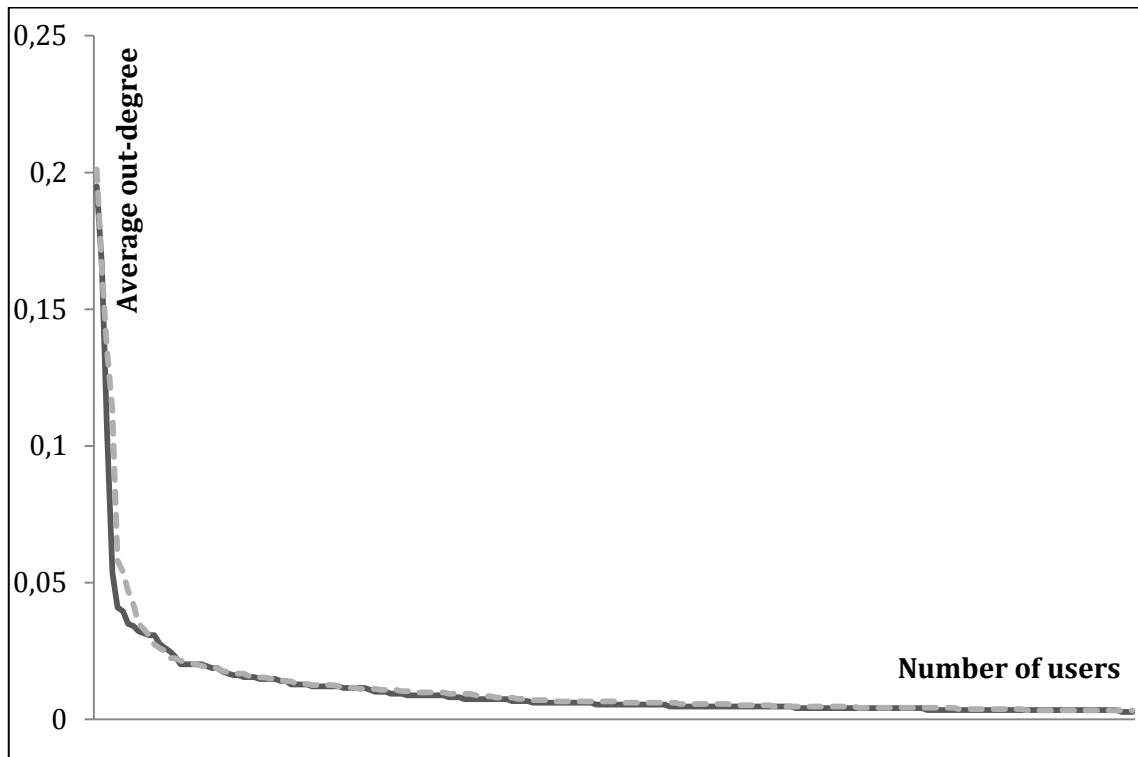
### **Relative changes in outgoing user activity**

First, we understand how the overall growth of the network relates to changes in outgoing user activity. In particular, we compare the average number of outgoing messages per user in the network before and after the appointment of the conversation

manager. In addition, we discuss how outgoing activity of the official ‘Terzake’ account has changed.

In network terminology, outgoing messages are defined as out-degree. For each of the users in the network, we calculated their average out-degree, that is, the proportion of other users in the network the user is connected to. In Figure 6, we present average out-degree per user *before* (i.e. the light, dotted line) and *after* (i.e. the dark, solid line) the appointment of the conversation manager. Both lines show the inevitable “long tail” of user participation (Shirky, 2008), as a few users address a lot of other users in the network and a lot of users are connected to very few other users in the network.

Figure 6 Average out-degree per user *before* (i.e. the dark, solid line) and *after* (i.e. the light, dotted line) the appointment of the conversation manager



Both the shape of the lines and the highest average out-degree scores are very similar before and after the appointment of the conversation manager (i.e. 0.18 and 0.20). The Twitter user scoring the highest average out-degree (i.e. 0.20 or 20%) provides no user description, except a picture and a symbol indicating the user’s fanaticism for the Flemish nationalist party N-VA.

In the light of our user analysis below, we discuss how the position of ‘@TerzakeTV’ changed before and after the appointment. We distinguish between the replies, mentions, and retweets. For the reply convention, we find the most notable increase. In absolute number, ‘Terzake’ sent 106 reply messages (compared to 19 before) and was

able to reach 17% of the users (compared to 3% before). The same goes for mentions, which show an increase in reach from 4% to 16% (or in absolute numbers: 67 additional mentions). Compared to replies and mentions, retweet behaviour shows a remarkably moderate increase; that is, from 2% to 4% (or in absolute numbers: 31 additional retweets).

Below, we account for the diversity in users that are addressed by the ‘Terzake’ Twitter account. Table 14 shows that replies are predominantly directed to the non-established and non-affiliated users (although this decreases after the appointment of the conversation manager in favour of replies to journalists). Concerning mentions and retweets; we observe that journalists are addressed most often. Remarkably, politicians’ messages are not retweeted, as the redistribution of their opinions possibly conflicts with the impartiality of information, which is a core principle of public service broadcasting.

Table 14 User diversity for outgoing messages

	Before the conversation manager ( $N_{\text{users}} = 44$ )	After the conversation manager ( $N_{\text{users}} = 208$ )
Replies sent	94% - Non-affiliated/non-established 6% - Media/journalists	81.8% - Non-affiliated/non-established 6% - Media/journalists 3.6% - Politicians/parties 1% - Opinion
Mentions sent	64.7% - Media/journalists 35.5% - Politicians/parties	52.1% - Media/journalists 16.6% - Politicians/parties 16.6% - Opinion
Retweets sent	82.6% - Media/journalists 13.4% - Opinion 4% - Non-affiliated/non-established	78.2% - Non-affiliated/non-established 11.7% - Media/journalists 9.7% - Politicians/parties 0.4% - Opinion

The category “Non-affiliated/non-established” reflects users that are not affiliated with a medium or a party and that have not been staged in the mass media for their expertise/opinion. The category “Opinion” contains users that have been staged in mass media at least once.

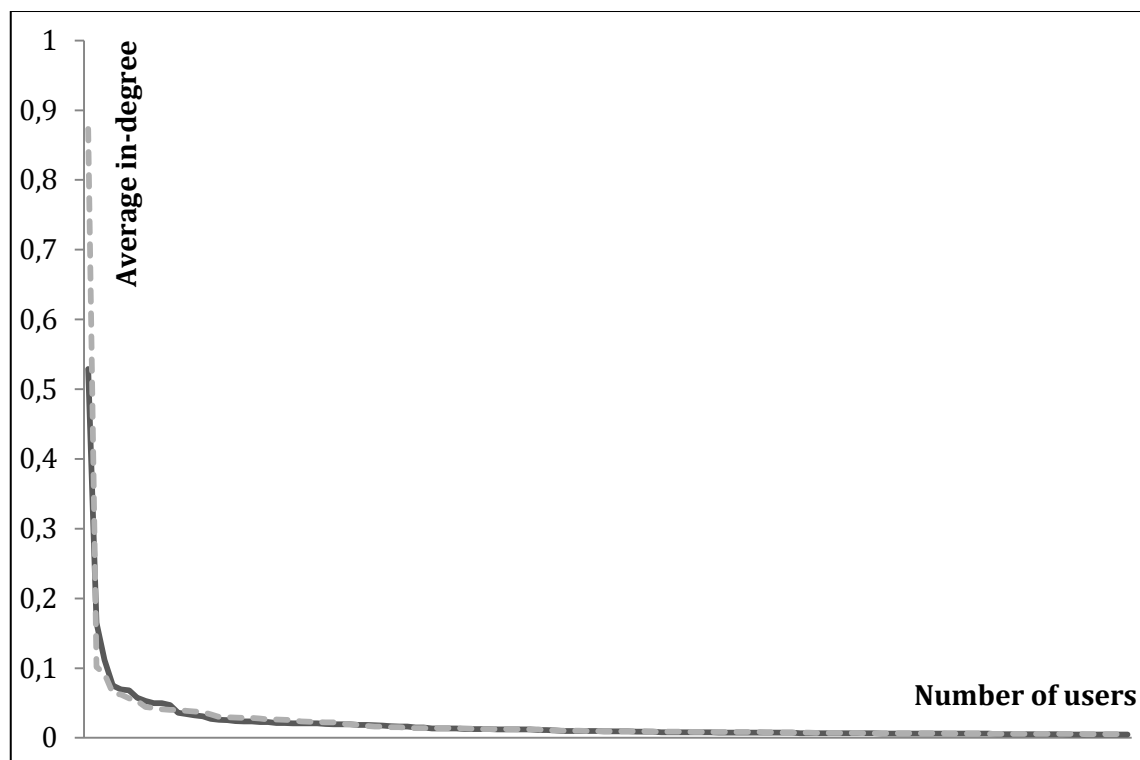
In general, the increase in outgoing messages does not lead to fundamentally different practices. We discuss underlying strategy and rationale of these actions in the second section of the results, reflecting the findings of our newsroom inquiry.

## Relative changes in incoming user activity

Second, we understand how the overall growth of the network relates to changes in incoming user activity (or in-degree). Again, we understand activity as a relative measure to grasp changes in the network before and after the appointment of the conversation manager. In addition, we discuss the position of '@TerzakeTV' and how its relative number of incoming messages has changed after the appointment of the conversation manager.

In Figure 7, we present average in-degree per user before (i.e. the light, dotted line) and after (i.e. the dark, solid line) the appointment of the conversation manager. Although the shape of the curves in Figure 7 is similar to the ones in Figure 6, average in-degree scores are much higher. In Figure 7, the top score is 0.87, whereas for outgoing activity, it is 0.20 (see Figure 6).

Figure 7 Average in-degree per user *before* (i.e. the dark, solid line) and *after* (i.e. the light, dotted line) the appointment of the conversation manager



The Twitter account scoring the highest average in-degree (i.e. 0.87) in Figure 7 is '@TerzakeTV'. After the appointment of the conversation manager, 'Terzake' is addressed by 87% of users in the network (compared to 52% before). As Figure 7 shows, we are again confronted with the "long tail" of user participation (Shirky, 2008). Few users are addressed by a lot of others in the network and a lot of users are addressed by very few users in the network.

Below we discuss how the position of ‘Terzake’ changed before and after the appointment. We distinguish between the replies, mentions, and retweets. For retweets, we find the most notable increase. Since the advent of the conversation manager, 34% of the users in the network retweeted messages sent by ‘Terzake’, compared to 9% before. In absolute numbers, ‘Terzake’ received 360 retweets, reflecting an increase of 279 messages. Second, ‘Terzake’ received reply messages from 85% of the users in the network, compared to 37% before the appointment of the conversation manager. In absolute numbers, the conversation manager received 387 replies, reflecting an increase of 247 messages. This is still in sharp contrast to the 106 reply messages ‘Terzake’ sent. Finally, the number of mentions shows the most moderate increase, that is, from 52% to 87% (or from 281 to 366 incoming messages).

In Table 15, we provide an overview of user diversity for the incoming messages. Again, we find little difference before and after the conversation manager. However, Table 15 looks very different from Table 14 in the sense that predominantly non-affiliated/non-established users address ‘Terzake’. In contrast, Table 14 showed that ‘Terzake’ predominantly mentions or retweets established users (i.e. media/journalists) or affiliated users (i.e. politicians/ parties). Hence, concerning user diversity, we find structural differences between the incoming Twitter messages and outgoing Twitter activity for the ‘Terzake’ account.



Table 15 User diversity for incoming messages

	Before the conversation manager ( $N_{\text{users}} = 440$ )	After the conversation manager ( $N_{\text{users}} = 931$ )
Replies received	84% - Non-affiliated/non-established 10.9% - Politicians/parties 4.2% - Media/journalists 0.9% - Opinion	82.8% - Non-affiliated/non-established 8.4% - Media/journalists 8.8% - Politicians/parties
Mentions received	75% - Non-affiliated/non-established 13.6% - Politicians/parties 9.7% - Media/journalists 1.7% - Opinion	80.4% - Non-affiliated/non-established 10.4% - Politicians/parties 0.5% - Opinion
Retweets received	69.4% - Non-affiliated/non-established 18% - Media/journalists 11% - Politicians/parties 1.6% - Opinion	74.4% - Media/journalists 14% - Non-affiliated/non-established 11.6% - Opinion

The category “Non-affiliated/non-established” reflects users that are not affiliated with a medium or a party and that have not been staged in the mass media for their expertise/opinion. The category “Opinion” contains users that have been staged in mass media at least once.

Overall, the above-presented measures indicate a few core ideas and trends. The overall growth in network size predominantly relates to changes in incoming user activity. In particular, ‘Terzake’ strengthened its position and becomes a very central actor in the network. However, the increase in incoming activity only partly translates in an increase in outgoing activity. The proportion in-degree/out-degree (i.e. incoming messages/outgoing messages) increased from 13% to 27%. Hence, asymmetry in communication patterns between the program and its tweeting audience has decreased. In addition, we encounter several evolutions for each of the Twitter conventions, in particular for replies versus retweets. The same can be noted about user diversity: outgoing retweets are used for media actors and mentions for political actors, while replies serve to react to non-established/non-affiliated actors. In contrast, for incoming messages, we notice the overall dominance of the latter.

We resume the discussion of the interview data below, starting with the understanding of the network structure from the journalists’ point of view.

## **Journalists' perceptions on the network structure and its users**

The networks we constructed are internalized within the newsroom through the perceptions of the journalists. In order to understand how this “translation” takes place, we asked participants to estimate (1) the size of the tweeting audience and (2) the amount of interactivity taking place in the network. Remarkably, they all underestimate the actual number of users tweeting about the program and overestimate the number of interactive Twitter messages (i.e. replies, mentions, and retweets). Journalists recall the more active users (sometimes even by name) but seem to “forget” the long tail of occasional contributors. In addition, the large amount of personal messages ‘Terzake’ receives is mistaken as a general characteristic for the entire network.

With the above in mind, we asked the interviewees to describe the profile of the “average” Twitter user in terms of socio-demographics and personality characteristics. The interviewees all perceive that the average tweeting viewer is a white, middle-aged man with a rather conservative or right-wing agenda. Concerning personality traits, we are allegedly dealing with a critical, news-savvy person with a sense of (dark) humour and a touch of narcissism. Moreover, these characteristics overlap with their conceptualization of the medium as such (as we discuss below). We understand how journalists denote Twitter when they make the comparison between Twitter and Facebook as social media platforms. For Twitter, we found references as *immature*, *sour* or *anonymous*, compared to *feminine*, *cosy* or *friendly* for Facebook. Nevertheless its negative charges, the added value of Twitter in the newsroom remains incontestable. The quote below illustrates that the integration of social media in the newsroom is characterized by “the duality of suspicion and attraction” (van Dijck & Poell, 2014). On one hand, its possibilities are recognized, but on the other hand reluctance and precaution are uttered as well:

*Twitter is very immature and way too blunt. It's a bunch of adolescents. [Later during the interview] When I read the reactions on Twitter during the program, I notice that amongst the noise, there is some interesting thinking going on. (K.L., journalist and program host)*

In our second and final results section, we discuss how the tweeting audience impacts newsroom practices and contextualize the numbers presented above.

## **The internalization of the tweeting audience and its impact on journalistic practices**

First, audience feedback comes in the form of aggregated analytics. In essence, this reflects the number of messages or posts about the program on social media. Through a

paid-for monitoring tool (called ‘Engagor’), social media traffic is captured and visualized in graphs. It allows program makers to understand social media buzz on the program, defined as *engagement* (K.L., the editor-in-chief, and N.V., the conversation manager). In addition, the tool defines *the influencers* (E.R., the online news manager for the entire news department) in the debate, reflecting the selection of the most active viewers we discussed above. Journalists adopt the terminology as defined by this monitoring tool to make sense of and attribute value to the audience. The concept of engagement is emblematic for the “post-exposure audience market,” but still lacks a uniform definition and interpretation on how it can be valuable as a comparative measure within the industry (Napoli, 2011). Moreover, the lack of transparency on aggregated metrics obscures and supports the inevitable inequality in social media participation, rather than controlling for it.

Within the newsroom, audience feedback via ‘Engagor’ predominantly functions *to signal debate* (N.V.). Alike viewing rates, the audience is conceptualized as a quantified and aggregated mass. The interviewees report that, to date, no connection is made between viewing rates, as measures of exposure, and Twitter traffic, as measures of post-exposure; that is, engagement. Whereas the former is based on a representative sample of users, defined in terms of socio-demographics, social media (and Twitter in particular) do not provide such demographics. Nevertheless, program makers argue that social media allow them to inform target groups that are different from the viewing audience in terms of socio-demographics. In particular, online/social media news consumers are understood as younger populations, as it fits the VRT’s core mission to reach both general and specific audiences, such as young people (VRT, 2012).

Furthermore, “signalling debate” is understood in “softer” (i.e. qualitative) terms: *Diversity in reactions and users ... The fact that it moves people, that it fits with the topics they perceive interesting* (N.V.). This evaluation is defined intuitively by consulting the actual Twitter messages via the free service tool ‘TweetDeck’ (i.e. a tool for real-time tracking and organization of Twitter streams). Based on our observations, ‘Engagor’ allows for a daily overview of the program’s social media traction, whereas ‘TweetDeck’ receives more continued attention. Actual contributions (i.e. content of the messages) are perceived more informative and, in this respect, more significant than the aggregated numbers (e.g. web analytics) (Baym, 2013; Hermida & Thurman, 2008). In our case study, no pre-defined goals were defined for social media buzz and a systematic comparison between different programs was not at stake. In this respect, the use of social media metrics is different from web metrics in the form of clicks for specific articles on online news websites (e.g. Anderson, 2011).

Second, we describe communication between the program makers and the audience on Twitter in a Q&A format. The user analysis (as presented in Table 14) shows that

replies, rather than mentions and retweets, are used to interact with the tweeting viewers. The network analysis showed asymmetry between the number of replies ‘Terzake’ received and sent out. Below, we account for this mismatch.

- Interviewer: *How consistent are you, in terms of replies to Twitter user?*
- N.V., the conversation manager: *When someone asks us what music is played during the program, I answer right away. On the other hand, it is impossible for me to answer all questions. As program makers, we choose between various topics or guests and these choices cannot be explained in 140 characters ... and that is something we struggle with.*
- K.L., the editor-in-chief: *If you If you want to be recognized as an opinion-leading and relevant program, you need to have the guts to reply criticism and engage in the public debate. I think we tackled some of those negative comments pretty well, such as the often-made accusation of a left-wing bias in our selection of topics and politicians.*

As the conversation manager states, functional questions (e.g. “What is the name of the song used in episode X?”) or technical issues (e.g. “I can’t find episode X on the website.”) are uncontested in the sense that these comments do not address journalistic practices. Hence, replies to these comments are evident. Furthermore, replies to comments that do address journalistic practices, for example, the selection of topics and guests, are understood as a means to provide accountability and transparency (Lasorsa, Lewis, & Holton, 2012). Nevertheless, the conversation manager pointed to platform-specific as well as journalistic reasons to refrain from replying. As the quote above shows, the 140-character limit permits proper responses, as it does not allow the nuance and elaboration that is needed to account for one’s actions. In addition, the anonymity and alleged subjectivity of users and their messages are also reasons to ignore comments or critique. For example, the use of a pseudonym prohibits proper identity control, which is considered problematic. In addition, when a username and description are provided but contain a clear ideological affiliation (e.g. Flemish Nationalist), critique on the program is regarded as being subjective. Hence, the conversation manager is reluctant to answer these critiques, as they are not uttered by impartial actors in the debate. Professional norms of objectivity and neutrality are extended on Twitter (and its users), as the program makers aim to secure their conventional position within the public debate beyond the boundaries of the TV format. We illustrate this with a reply message to an anonymised user’s critique that one of the

proponents was getting too much talk time: *@user\_X we bring both sides of the story: both the mayor's and the youngsters' point of view. Afterwards you can make an informed judgment yourself.*

As briefly mentioned by K.L. (the editor-in-chief of 'Terzake') in the quote above (cf. *It's a bunch of adolescents*), journalists utter frustration about the overload of negative reactions they read on Twitter. More specifically, they feel as if the tweeting audience often challenges them. We consider these challenges to be explicit (i.e. through critical or offensive comments) as well as implicit (i.e. through the general subjectivity and opinionated discussion that characterizes the Twitter debate). However, there is no point where these challenges become challenging in the sense that core values of objectivity and neutrality are not negotiated. In contrast, these challenges make journalists very aware of their professional identity, which they confirm in their communication activities.

Third, we discuss the tweeting audience as a potential news source. User contributions that lead or add to stories are considered highly valuable (Williams et al., 2011). In practice, the retrieval of useable content is very low, as only two concrete cases were presented to us whereby audience members actually contributed to a story. In this respect, newsgathering via users is "a by-product," reflecting its exceptional character (Hermida & Thurman, 2008). The quote below reveals the hybrid role of Twitter users, as in practice, the different roles and meanings we demarcated above are in constant exchange:

*The example about "De Crem" is obviously very useful information. [De Crem: information from a tweeting viewer on previous actions of an invited guest, which can be used in the light of the interview taking place in the studio]. When people tweet about the shoes of Lieven [one of the hosts] that is not very useful, although you might pass that advice to the stylist. When users are tweeting how great or touching a particular story is, this information is also useful because it is about validation and collective agreement, whereas information on De Crem is about knowledge and insights. (K.L., the editor-in-chief)*

In addition, retweets are recognized as practices through which media share their gatekeeping role (Lasorsa et al., 2012). Nevertheless, the network analysis showed that the conversation manager's retweet activity remains very limited. Retweets are understood as endorsements of particular content and follow the same logic as the replies, in the sense that objectivity and neutrality prevail. This relates to our user analyses, which showed that politicians' messages are not retweeted. In addition, journalists (e.g. the host of the program) and established experts (which are occasionally featured in the show) are among the users that are endorsed. The endorsement of non-

established users is very limited as their messages are not newsworthy enough or have not been verified (which is perceived to be the case for journalists' messages).

Finally, we understand users as co-hosts in the program, which to date still reflects an exceptional practice within the newsroom. Occasionally, Twitter users are asked to provide questions throughout the day for guests invited later that evening in the show. In the evening, the selected messages are shown on screen (including the Twitter username) and presented to the invitees. The selection of messages is defined by social media parameters, which in turn are "refracted" by journalistic and format-technical factors. In first instance, popularity on social media defines the messages that are up for selection by the conversation manager. Subsequently, he defines the added value of the question, in essence, by comparing it to the questions the host usually presents to the guests. In addition, the identity of the Twitter user is checked, as the program makers aim to include Twitter users that can be identified as neutral, objective actors in the public debate (i.e. no extreme or non-democratic voices). In addition, current program-technical issues permit the use of questions that pop up during the program, as, for example, real-time visual representation of Twitter messages cannot yet be established.

### **3.4.5 Conclusion and discussion**

The appointment of the conversation manager reflects the *professionalization* and the *separation* of social media use in the newsroom on a daily basis. On one hand, both activity toward and interactivity with the audience increased due to the conversation manager's dedication to the tweeting audience. On the other hand, program makers seek control in a public space in which the flow of information becomes ever more uncontrollable. Alike Graham (2012), we understand the conversation manager as a "facilitator" of the public debate, without getting involved in the actual discussion. Within the newsroom, the predominant value of Twitter is a "sensory" one, as it signals what the audience thinks, likes, and dislikes. In this respect, audience metrics are a "supplement to news judgment" (Anderson, 2011, p. 563). As this case study is defined in time and space, behaviour and attitudes reflect the very early stages of the conversation manager's appointment and are contingent upon the newsroom and program we studied. Moreover, the Flemish audio-visual market is fairly small and use of social media in relation to television is limited in Flanders (i.e. 16%) (iMinds-iLab.o, 2013).

The juxtaposing of Twitter data and the newsroom inquiry, embedded in Bourdieu's field approach, provides insight in the impact of social media logic within the journalistic field (which is governed by its own logic). Networks are shaped by the logic of the journalistic field as well as the logic of social media. The conversation manager

consciously appropriates the different Twitter conventions. He was able to strengthen the program's position on Twitter and the overall debate grew in size. However, the conversation manager does not impact addressivity between users, as few users address/are addressed whereas the majority does/is not (cf. the long tails). In addition, we stress the impact of social media logic on journalists' perceptions and newsroom practices. Recent conceptualizations of social media logic (e.g. Klinger & Svensson, 2014; van Dijck & Poell, 2013) need further development toward a comparative framework in which both journalistic and social media *news* logics are defined.

In a public broadcasting context, social media metrics fit within the on-going struggle to define "the public," traditionally understood in terms of aggregated viewing rates and accompanying demographics. Conceptual and empirical bridges between incumbent and emerging metrics are still absent. In addition, we encounter the role of third-party translators of audience data, for example, commercial companies selling aggregated audience metrics and accompanying rhetoric but keeping the detailed records themselves. These stakeholders (and journalists alike) are bound by data structures upon which these platforms are built and algorithms through which the flow of content is shaped. Awareness and critical reflections upon the data as well as the data labels, such as "influence," are missing in the newsroom but definitely deserve further examination by scholarly research.

## 3.5 Study V: What social media data mean for audience research: A multidimensional investigation of Twitter use during a current affairs debate program

**D'heer, E. & Verdegem, P. (2015). What social media data mean for audience research: A multidimensional investigation of Twitter use during a current affairs TV programme, *Information, Communication & Society*, 18(2), 221-234.**

As shown in the previous studies, citizens function as additional participants in political communication. Via social media, they address politicians and journalists and challenge both actors' existing routines and practices. The fifth and final study included in this thesis serves as a concluding piece of work, taking the perspective of citizen actors. Our methodological approach is similar to Studies III and IV as we combine online behaviour and user interpretations.

The objective of Study V is twofold. First, we aim to understand tweeting viewers' behaviour and interpretations in relation to televised election debates. Second, we discuss the utility and value of social media data to understand these emerging audience practices. More specifically, we define two validity issues related to the use of social media data, which are discussed in Chapter 2 (sub-section 2.2.4). Study V combines a network and content analysis of Twitter messages on the current affairs debate program 'De Zevende Dag' with in-depth interviews with the most active Twitter users.

The findings show Twitter use is symbolic, ephemeral and directed at the television screen. Viewers co-discuss the political debate, rather than addressing the journalists hosting the show. Further, viewers enjoy writing critical and captivating messages, whereby irony and sarcasm are appreciated. Compared to the neutral and objective character of the political debate on the television screen, tweeting viewers' discussion of politics is affective, performative and entertaining. We highlight the social function of tweeting, as its value is not necessarily in the content of the messages but in the act of tweeting itself.

### 3.5.1 Introduction

When conceptualizing and reflecting on the audience concept, we cannot ignore the diffusion of the internet and social media in particular. Publically available and accessible social media data, such as Twitter messages, contribute to the growing



interest of both practitioners and media scholars to understand and manage audiences. Concerning television in particular, scholars have studied how micro-blogging boosts during live broadcasts and affects how traditional media forms are experienced (Anstead & O'Loughlin, 2011; Bruns & Burgess, 2011; Highfield, Harrington, & Bruns, 2013; Larsson & Moe, 2012). Often, keywords or hashtags organize discussion on a particular program or televised event, and allow us, as researchers, to define and investigate how viewers enhance their TV experience. These studies embrace the benefits of unobtrusive measures to understand the meaning-making processes that audiences engage in. In this paper, we add a layer of understanding via the combination of digital traces and user insights. In doing so, we define the challenges of using data gathered via Twitter for audience research.

This paper addresses Twitter talk during multiple episodes of an eminent current affairs program, called 'De Zevende Dag'. The program mainly consists of debates between political candidates since the episodes under investigation were aired during the campaign of the 2012 local elections in Belgium. Especially during highly politicized times, scholars point to the evolving role of television in relation to social media practices (Anstead & O'Loughlin, 2011; Elmer, 2012). Via real-time contributions, viewers can publically support, refute or ridicule political actors on the television screen. How do these emerging practices alter the way audiences engage with televisual media? Hence, we aim to understand *mediated* meaning making and social use of television. Our analytical approach is advanced in the sense that we combine behavioural data (i.e. tweets) and user insights (via in-depth interviews). Hence, we apply a narrow but more in-depth focus. Our agenda is twofold as this study (1) investigates emerging audience practices on Twitter and (2) defines the challenges of Twitter research to understand these practices. In this respect, we contribute to the ongoing debate on audience research methodologies and in extension, the role of big data in social sciences.

We start this paper with an outline of the Flemish current affairs program 'De Zevende Dag'. Following, we discuss the current understanding of Twitter as an audience (measurement) technology and put forth two validity issues related to the *mediated nature* of audience practices. The methodology section outlines how the combination of analytical tools (i.e. the combination of behavioural data and user insights) allows us to understand these mediated audience practices. Subsequently, we present the results and discuss the role of social media in audience studies.

## 3.5.2 Theoretical framework

### **'De Zevende Dag' and the Flemish Twitter user**

'De Zevende Dag' is a current affairs program launched in 1988. It is aired live on the generalist channel of the public service broadcaster VRT, which is the most popular channel in Flanders (i.e. the northern region of Belgium). It is predominantly defined as a political discussion program, but also covers sports, culture, media and lifestyle. Every Sunday morning at 11 a.m., two hosts invite eminent guests to discuss a selection of news events. As mentioned earlier, the episodes we studied mainly consist of interviews with or debate between political candidates.

In reference to Örnebring (2003), 'De Zevende Dag' is defined as a current affairs debate format for the following reasons: (1) the discussion of current socio-economic and political issues in the form of debates or interviews and (2) a contribution to the political life in Flanders and public opinion formation. Since 2010, the program is co-hosted by two prominent political journalists, called Ivan De Vadder and Indra Dewitte (who has been temporarily replaced by Linda De Win during our research period in 2012). The hosts conduct interviews and moderate debates to ensure all parties get fair hearing, thereby disclosing disagreement and discussion rather than consensus. The program is a traditional public service, news-focused format in the sense that citizens do not influence the program content.

Since 2010, the public service broadcaster VRT systematically promotes dedicated hashtags for each of its program. This fits within a general, multimedia approach to reach and engage audiences, including a program website, a Facebook fan page, a Twitter account and a dedicated hashtag.<sup>6</sup> The program features on-screen prompts of the dedicated hashtag, but Twitter messages are neither displayed nor integrated in the program. 'De Zevende Dag' has an audience viewing rate of about 5%, but nevertheless scores amongst the most popular Flemish programs on Twitter.<sup>7</sup> Without professional conversation management and nonetheless its moderate viewing rates, the program seems to generate a sustainable Twitter audience. Also internationally, similar programs generate substantial Twitter traffic (Anstead & O'Loughlin, 2011; Elmer, 2012; Larsson, 2013).

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<sup>6</sup> Program webpage: <http://www.een.be/programmas/de-zevende-dag>, Facebook fanpage:

<https://www.facebook.com/dezevendedag?fref=ts>, Twitter account: <https://twitter.com/dezevendedag>

<sup>7</sup> Deckmyn, D. (2012, September 7). We kijken om te tweeten. Twitter is de nieuwe gele briefkaart [We watch to tweet. Twitter replaces the yellow response card]. *De Standaard*. Retrieved from <http://www.standaard.be/>

Based on a representative survey of the Flemish population, we know 27% has a Twitter account (iMinds-iLab.o, 2012). Twitter use is on the rise (+12.9% compared to 2011), but still lags behind Facebook (62.5%). In addition, we keep in mind that Twitter messages have an audience of readers as well, which significantly multiplies the reach of the messages (Chadwick, 2011). Concerning user profile, the survey indicates that the age group of 20–50 years makes up about 75% of the Twitter users and male users are overrepresented (64%). Respondents link motivations to use Twitter predominantly to (1) monitoring news and current affairs (40%) and (2) passing thought and opinion (20%). This profile description links up to the concept of ‘news junkies’ (Prior, 2006), which reflects how the increase in information on the internet is linked to knowledge concentration amongst the people who like the news.

In the following, we discuss existing literature on Twitter as an audience (measurement) technology and we put forth two validity issues related to social media inquiry. We stress the *relative* objectivity of behavioural data and point to the technological bias of Twitter-based metrics and analyses. In this respect, we recognize the added value of combining behavioural online data and offline interpretations. Two research questions (RQs) are put forth that allow us to understand what these mediated audience practices mean on a theoretical and methodological level.

## **The tweeting audience**

Via Twitter, audience members engage in virtual, public spaces without transcending the physical boundaries of the living room, in which television consumption is traditionally situated (Morley, 1980). This raises questions concerning the strategies and methods we should apply to assess the act of audiencing. In the following, we discuss how Twitter use in relation to television is currently defined and understood in what is still an emerging field of study (Bredl, Ketzer, Hünninger, & Fleischer, 2014).

Twitter has been defined as a “backchannel” for television, which reflects the reactive nature of Twitter talk as it allows users to provide life commentary on television shows (Bruns & Burgess, 2011). In similar vein, tweeting viewers during an episode of the political program ‘BBC Question Time’ are referred to as “the viewertariat”, that is, an engaged and committed segment of the audience that not only views but also *reviews* (Anstead & O’Loughlin, 2011). Harrington, Highfield, and Bruns (2013) argue that Twitter is more than a backchannel by emphasizing the social in social media. They refer to a “virtual lounge room”, which connects audience members and makes viewing an even more communal activity. The hashtag convention in particular is associated with the creation of a collective entity of users as it displays the user’s visible and deliberate attempt to be part of the group (Deller, 2011; Highfield et al., 2013; Wohn & Na, 2011). In extension, scholars investigated the construction of a Twitter fan community around

particular programs such as 'Glee' (Wood & Baughman, 2012) and the Eurovision song contest (Highfield et al., 2013).

In essence, these studies use behavioural online data to understand the social uses and interpretations of televised texts. The investigation of audiences' uses and interpretations of media in an offline context is an incumbent field of study. In particular, the use of qualitative (often ethnographic) studies of the audience was able to account for the diversity in audience practices related one's social context (Ang, 1985; Lull, 1990; Morley, 1980). Nonetheless the appeal of digital data to study the meaning and use of television, we want to stress its complementarity with *thick descriptions* via *offline* qualitative research. We do this by addressing two validity issues related to the study of social media from an audience research perspective.

First, social media data are not objective as such. Digital observations provide unbiased data about user behaviour "*in relation to the communication channel under investigation*" but not with regard to human behaviour per se (Jürgens, 2014, p. 47). Hence, nonetheless, the abundance of these aggregated utterances, tweets remain snapshots when linked to the individual users. In this study, we do not take into account what they share on other platforms, not to mention, in an offline context. Important here is to enquire what they share on Twitter and how they understand and value these practices. How is meaning making "performed" through Twitter (Papacharissi, 2012)? Does it reflect a particular representation of the self in relation to one's "imagined audience" (Marwick & boyd, 2011)?

Second, the analysis of Twitter is based on digital objects, such as hyperlinks, hashtags and mentions. Although this facilitates the comparison between different studies and eliminates researcher bias (Jürgens, 2014), it exposes us to a *technological* bias. To what extent do we (mis)take a technological structure for a social one? The technical function of digital objects does not always match its appropriation by the users. Concerning hashtags, Bruns and Moe (2014, p. 18) state that if users include topical hashtags in their own tweets, but do not follow other users' hashtagged tweets, "*the primary utility of hashtagging would be negated*". Concerning mentions and replies, we can easily extract these objects and construct conversation networks but that does not necessarily allow us to "detect the social" in social media (Marres, 2013).

To conclude, we put forth two research questions that guide our analyses and contribute to our understanding of the role of social media data for audience research. The research questions reflect the combined interpretation of Twitter messages, television content and user insights via in-depth interviews. We apply these questions on the Flemish current affairs program 'De Zevende Dag', which we outlined earlier.

RQ1: *How do tweeting viewers communicate about the program via Twitter? This includes (1) the use of Twitter conventions (i.e. replies, mentions and retweets) and (2) the content of the hashtagged Twitter messages.*

RQ2: *How do tweeting viewers define (1) their mediated meaning making practices and (2) their mediated sense of sociality?*

### **3.5.3 Research design**

The study combines three data sources (i.e. Twitter messages, TV video footage and in-depth interviews) to conduct (1) a content analysis of Twitter messages, (2) a network analysis of user–user interactions and (3) an analysis of in-depth interviews. In addition, as will become clear later in the paper, we combined these methods on an *integrative* manner. We start with the outline of the collection and analysis of Twitter messages, as this guided the selection of interviewees and the questions they were asked.

#### **Twitter data collection**

The Twitter application program interface allows us to capture tweets containing a certain keyword or hashtag using the open-source tool yourTwapperKeeper (Bruns, 2012). Following this procedure, we collected a corpus of 3961 tweets containing the dedicated hashtag (i.e. #7dag). This corpus reflects one month of data; that is, September 2012, and comprises five episodes. We cover a limited period of time, as the focus lies on the combination of behavioural patterns and user perceptions.

We acknowledge the hashtag approach is not an exhaustive data collection method (for a more in-depth discussion, see Bruns & Stieglitz, 2014). We do stress a few particular reasons that support the use of the hashtag in this context. First, the hashtag is consistently prompted before and during the program and is widely adopted by “the viewertariat” (Anstead & O’Loughlin, 2011). In addition, we argue that the use of the hashtag reflects the user’s intentional association with the debate on the program (Bruns & Burgess, 2011; Larsson & Moe, 2012).

#### **A multi-layered analysis of Twitter communication patterns**

Bruns and Moe (2014) define three modes of information exchange and user interaction on Twitter which can be understood as micro- (i.e. @username communication), meso- (i.e. follower–followee networks) and macro-layers (i.e. hashtagged communication). In this study, we opt for a multi-layered understanding of Twitter communication by focusing on the micro-level and macro-level.

The micro-level focuses on a particular Twitter convention; that is, the use of the @-*sign* followed by the addressee's username. Meraz and Papacharissi (2013) refer to this convention as an "addressivity marker", which allows the user to communicate to a specific other user. These mentions can be placed at the beginning of the message (i.e. a reply), within the message (i.e. a mention) or in the form of a retweet, and are used to construct a communication network between Twitter users. Hence, only the hashtagged messages that contained an @-sign were retained for the construction and analysis of a network of users, using the SNA software UCINET (Borgatti et al., 2002).

Twitter users can apply these micro-level conventions to address other tweeting viewers as well as actors in the program (e.g. the hosts or political actors staged on the TV screen). Therefore, we coded the users who received or sent out more than 10 messages accordingly. More specifically, we defined these users as (1) journalists/media outlets, (2) politicians/parties, (3) established experts or (4) citizens.

These micro-level interactions are embedded in hashtagged information exchanges (i.e. via '#7dag'). In order to understand these macro-layers of communication, we conducted a content analysis. More specifically, we selected Twitter messages and corresponding video footage for three out of the five episodes. A content analysis allows us to understand if Twitter messages (1) are attuned to the topics and issues discussed on the TV screen, (2) utter reflections upon the production (format) or the producers/hosts and, last, (3) refer to the act of audiencing or the other tweeting viewers. The categories are mutually exclusive and are applied on the original messages (no retweets) as we focus on the diversity in content rather than the popularity of particular messages.

Put concisely, discussion on the program (RQ1) is understood through the combined analysis of micro and macro modes of communication. In the following, we focus on RQ2, that is, user perceptions on (1) their mediated meaning-making practices and (2) their mediated sense of sociality.

### **A selection of Twitter users for in-depth interviews**

In order to complement and enrich our behavioural data, we looked for participants who are well embedded in the discussion, both on the micro- and macro-level. So, based on the network analysis, we defined participants who sent *and* received over 10 messages containing an @-sign in the form of replies, mentions or retweets. In addition, participants were ranked on their overall activity (i.e. the number of hashtagged tweets), so we could select amongst the top contributors. Concerning identity, users who had no affiliation with mass media or the formal political field were retained.

Throughout our solicitation for participants, it became clear that the selection criteria we set mainly apply to male users. We do acknowledge that this could be different if we set different selection criteria (e.g. less active users). The gender imbalance of Twitter use in Flanders (as contextualized earlier) might be more outspoken for these practices. In addition, the program's target audience influences who is watching, hence co-determines who is (actively) tweeting during the show. In reference to the RQ, we argue that user (inter)activity outweighs the user's gender.

The sample included 12 men, aged 24–60 (37 on average). The interviewees vary in family situation: that is, single/alone (2), being married/living together (2), being married/living together with children (4) and living with parents/family members (4). Aside age and family situation, participants are relatively similar in terms of their cultural background (i.e. higher education, non-manual employment, eloquent speech and well-informed). These actors could be referred to as 'news junkies' (Prior, 2006), as they act as well-informed and active watchdogs.

## **Interview procedure and analysis**

The 12 participants took part in a Computer-Assisted Online Interview that lasted about two hours and took place via a platform of the participant's choice (i.e. Skype, Google or Facebook chat). The interview was centred on the use and meaning of Twitter in conjunction with news and current affairs and the 'De Zevende Dag' in particular, whereby the participants' Twitter messages were used as stimuli. During the semi-structured interviews, we discussed (1) their mediated meaning-making practices and (2) their mediated sense of sociality. We used NVivo to analyse the interviews and interpret the answers of the participants inductively and deductively. We depart from the validity issues and related RQs we defined earlier and at the same time let them be altered and extended by the data. We translated the tweets and user reflections that are incorporated in the results section from Dutch to English. In addition, the names of the participants are replaced by pseudonyms.

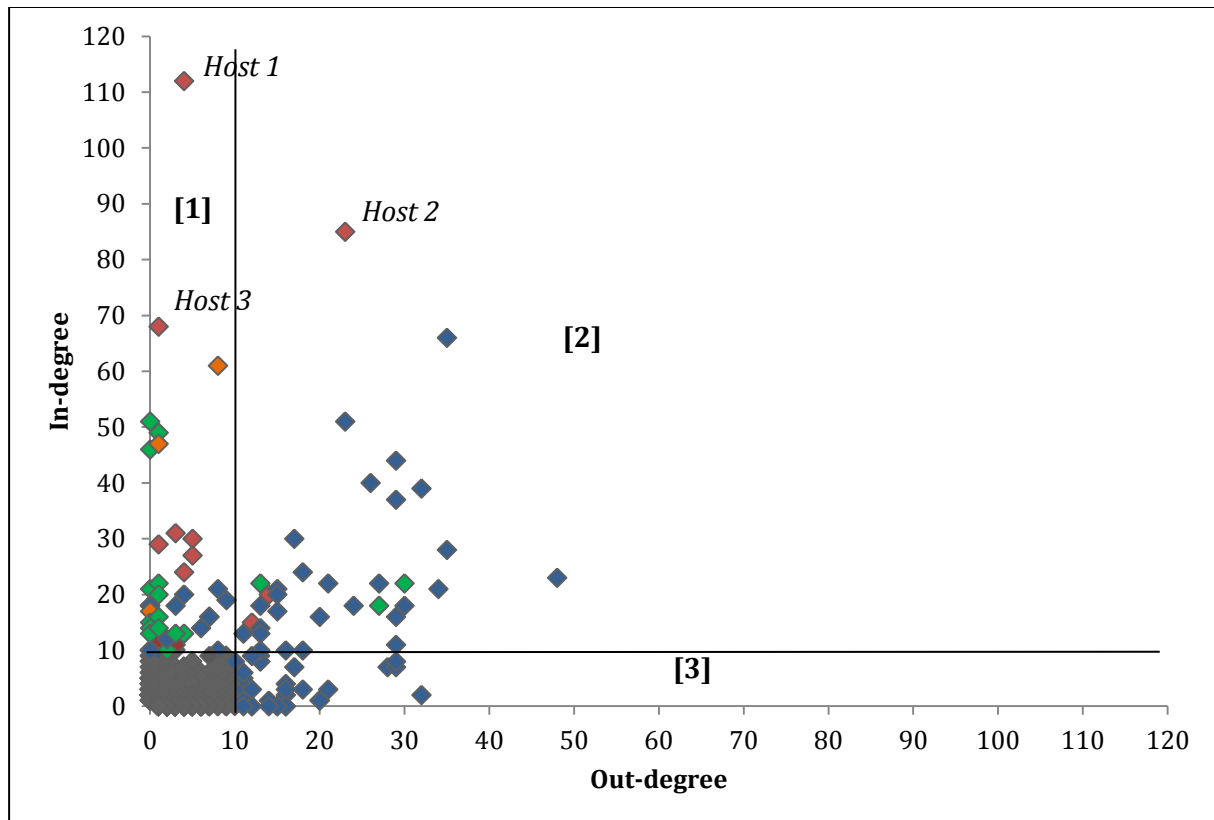
### **3.5.4 Results**

#### **Detecting the social: Between micro- and macro-levels of communication**

We initially focus on the user-user network, which reflects the micro-level communication patterns for five episodes in September 2012. To analyse and properly visualize the network in UCINET, the users with a degree higher than one (i.e. >one message sent or received) are retained, resulting in a network of 631 users and 2854

ties. We opt for a rather unconventional visualization of the user–user network in the sense that we provide a two-dimensional representation of user centrality in the network (see Figure 8). The position the user holds on the graph is defined by the combination of (1) one’s in-degree (i.e. number of messages received) and (2) one’s out-degree (i.e. number of messages sent). This allows us to define who is subject of conversation or active *within* the conversation.

Figure 8 A two-dimensional understanding of user centrality.



Legend: Green is politician/party, red is mass media/journalist, blue is citizen and orange is established expert (nodes = 631, ties = 2854)

Based on the added grid lines on Figure 8, we demarcate three different user segments (i.e. [1], [2] and [3]), which can be meaningfully linked to the identity of the specific users. Users who address or are addressed more than 10 times are coloured according to their identity as a formal political actor (politician or political party), a media actor (journalist or media organization), an established expert with regular appearances in the mass media or a citizen actor.

Most of the users are situated in the grey segment, which reflects visibility in the debate on an ad hoc base. It reflects the power law distribution (also called the long tail), which applies to user activity on social media in general and creates inevitable inequality in engagement (Shirky, 2008). Segment [1] reflects users who take central



positions in the debate in the sense that they are subject of communication but rarely engage in the conversation themselves. It mainly consists of established actors, referring to journalists, politicians or experts. We need to take into account that the construction of the network is based on multiple episodes. Hence, compared with the other guests, the hosts are on screen every week, which contributes to their visibility in the network. Other studies confirm the central positions established actors occupy in terms of the number of messages they receive (Ausserhofer & Maireder, 2013; Burgess & Bruns, 2011; Larsson & Moe, 2012). Hence, in our communication network, segment [1] reflects the *social* as a performance indicator and for segment [3] this would be an activity indicator. Segment [2] reflects the users who are both active and reactive or recognized by fellow tweeters in the debate, also referred to as “networkers” (Larsson & Moe, 2012). Hence, from the overall communication network, we define a small collective of *interactive users*, who are predominantly citizen actors.

However, based on the interview data, we argue that these patterns reflect a somewhat distorted depiction of the micro-level communication practices. Follow-up conversation on hashtagged tweets is not always captured as users do not include the hashtag in their follow-up messages (Bruns & Stieglitz, 2014). Based on the interviews, we understand the selective nature of these practices. Aside practical reasons (i.e. the 140-character limit), we noticed that the non-use of the hashtag is related to the user’s “imagined audience” (Marwick & boyd, 2011). Follow-up messages are not always directed at, hence, relevant for, the ‘De Zevende Dag’ audience. As Mark (M, 20) states: *You just don’t want to read all the conversations taking place between users during the two-hour program.*

In essence, “second-order” conversations circulate during the program but are *indirectly* linked to the program. We understand them as second-order conversation as they take place beyond the hashtag audience on whom we generally tend to focus. Dave complements Mark’s reflection as he elaborates on the selective scope of these messages.

*I try to avoid the use of the hashtag [i.e. #7dag], because a reply message is often very specifically related to a particular person. I mean, when someone replies one of my tweets, saying ‘hey, have you read about this or that’, this message is not related to the program anymore, so it makes more sense to address me in particular. (Dave, M, 27):*

This statement does not apply for established actors, such as the hosts or politicians shown on the screen. The inclusion of their @names in the hashtagged Twitter messages serves a double purpose, that is, they are used to talk *about* them and in a second instance, to talk *to* them. In this respect, these Twitter messages are perceived as relevant for the entire hashtag audience. Hence, the inclusion or exclusion of the hashtag

is different for the different actor types these messages are directed at. In this respect, the communication network we drew contains an overrepresentation of “talking about” messages (i.e. the use of the @-sign to talk *about* users), which are related to performance rather than the social.

During the interviews, users indicate that they do not always follow the ‘#7dag’ tweets whilst watching the program, which provides additional support for the idea that the hashtag gathers content (cf. “talking about”) rather than people. They do understand the hashtag is a searchable object and occasionally go beyond their timeline, for example, when one of the ‘#7dag’ tweets appears on one’s timeline through a retweet of a follower. Nonetheless, we argue that the overall network of users participating in the ‘#7dag’ conversation consists of multiple smaller entities (i.e. timelines), largely unaware of one another, yet within a shared public space (as exemplified by Mark’s following statement). The select group of people Mark (M, 24) talks about can be conceptualized as “ideal readers” (Marwick & boyd, 2011), as he sees them as equal in their tweeting behaviour during the program.

*I kind of know who is watching and who isn’t, because I notice a lot of people on my timeline are tweeting about the program and we often share opinions within this select group of people. The usual suspects, so to say. We do interact with one another. More specifically, we retweet and reply one another, which – to me – define a sense of sociality and connectedness. (Mark, M, 24)*

Although the hashtag allows us to define and investigate a collection of tweeting viewers, we cannot simply translate this technological infrastructure to a social one. The combination of behavioural patterns and user perceptions shows that the analysis of the social is a challenging task, whereby the objective (i.e. network) structure and the subjective experience of the user do not necessarily align. In the following part, we understand how people make sense of televised texts *through* Twitter via the combined interpretation of the Twitter messages, TV program content and user interpretations.

### **Reflexive performances of the self: On the value of Twitter use**

Well before the advent of social network platforms, TV is acknowledged as an interactional resource and a supplier of topics for conversation (Lull, 1990; Morrison & Krugman, 2001). Twitter now provides a public arena for these conversations to take place, which affects the nature and dynamics of these conversations. Twitter use whilst watching TV is a symbolic practice, that is, an assertion of one’s program taste and playful self-expression. In this respect, we argue that the public association one makes with the program can be linked to the “moral hierarchy” of TV programs, that is, a valued ranking of TV programs (Alasuutari, 1992, 1996). Although we acknowledge not

all program choice is selective and self-reflexive, participants spontaneously evaluate particular TV programs through classifications, justifications and explanations, resulting in a “moral hierarchy” of TV programs. Based on this moral hierarchy of TV programs (Alasuutari, 1996), in which news and current affairs are on the top and soap operas at the bottom, we understand how people discuss the use of Twitter in relation to TV. We provide a brief quote that shows the selective character of these practices in relation to the TV program’s position in the moral hierarchy. Walter spontaneously gives an excuse for his Twitter use during a “low brow” show. Such excuses are not provided for the program we discuss here.

*Concerning entertainment programs? I admit that – in an unguarded moment – I do tweet about ‘The Voice’ [reality TV/Talent show]. (Walter, M, 35)*

As we further argue, not only the act of viewing but also the use of Twitter in relation to the program is morally valued, which is reflected in the presentation and content of the messages. Visible associations with the program (via the hashtag) trigger users’ self-awareness, which becomes clear when they reflect upon their messages. We provide an extract from one of the interviews, in which the interviewee was confronted with one of his tweets.

Interviewer: *This is one of your Twitter messages: ‘An addendum to Meyrem Almaci [a politician]: the Glass-Steagall Act was recalled in 1999 under the presidency of Bill Clinton #banks #7dag’ [Original, in Dutch: Aanvulling bij Meyrem Almaci: de Glass-Steagall Act werd in 1999 herroepen in de VS, onder president Bill Clinton dus #banken #7dag]*

Matthias (M, 24): *Haha, what a nerd tweet, but it is true!*

Interviewer: *What do you mean ‘nerd tweet’?*

Matthias (M, 24): *I mean, who knows the Glass-Steagall Act?*

Interviewer: *So why did you share it?*

Matthias (M, 24): *Well, it’s actually about the image that Flemish people have about politics in the U.S. They think Democrats are good and Republicans are bad. I would vote for the Democrats in the U.S. as well but those stereotypes bother me. Also...maybe, I wanted to show this is part of my common knowledge ;-). All is vanity :-).*

There are a few interesting aspects in this respondent’s rhetoric. First, the interviewee allegedly ridicules his contribution, “haha, what a nerd tweet”. A related answer from another participant is: *Apparently...I mainly use it to spread bullshit* (Steve, M, 34). Participants ascribe a certain triviality to their tweeting practices, which is in

contrast with the number of messages they send out every episode. This pattern is very similar for the tone of their messages in the sense that they question or disagree with what is said in the program (see also Matthias, M, 24, presented earlier) or in extreme cases even consider it utter nonsense (see following Dave, M, 27), yet value to report about it.

- Dave (M, 27): *About 99% of the time, they don't have anything to say that I believe or that I don't know yet.*
- Interviewer: *So why do you watch then? ;-)*
- Dave (M, 27): *Just to tweet! :-)*

Twitter behaviour seems paradoxical in the sense that users are motivated to tweet but at the same time they mock their practices. In addition, they are mainly driven from a kind of disdain or disagreement with what is being discussed in the program. Utterances often stem from criticism for and/or denunciation of the incumbent political organization (Rosanvallon, 2008). However, this seems to be an end as such rather than a means for political change as Rosanvallon alludes to. The interviewees acknowledge their influence on the debate (or the political agenda in particular) remains limited, but they do not expect or call for profound changes. Reflections on TV are fun; they make TV watching an amusing activity. The following two quotes exemplify the playful performance of the self in the particular context of Twitter (Papacharissi, 2012). The 140-character limit makes users very conscious upon the formulation of their messages.

- Bart (M, 47): *[after confronting him with his own Twitter message]. It is a rhetorical question, directed at nobody actually. It is just a cynical remark in the form of a question, without actually being a question. It is way of writing to utter criticism. With only 140 characters to get noticed, you have to be creative. That's why I like to formulate things a bit differently.*
- Gert (M, 44): *[after confronting him with his own Twitter message]. It is just for fun actually, but the tweet also wants to convey that politician is making a fool of himself. I know a fact-based discussion would be better, but I am allowed to have some fun, right? Hence, the tone of the messages is often cynical or sarcastic ;-).*

Triviality, creativity and irony go hand in hand with the presentation of one's expertise, knowledge or opinion on the issues as debated on TV. Here, we present the findings of our content analysis (see Table 16) and how they relate to the statements of the interviewees. The categories are the following: (1) the actors, their arguments and issues discussed in the program (i.e. program content), (2) the moderation of the

debates and the choice of the actors and the topics (i.e. program format) and (3) the act of audiencing and the other tweeting viewers (i.e. audience).

Table 16 Categories of Twitter messages

Content category	Relative frequency
Program content issues & actors	77%
Program format	16%
Audience/audiencing	7%

The percentages are calculated on the total amount of original Twitter messages (no retweets),  $N= 1145$

As Table 16 shows, most of the Twitter messages are references to the discussants and the topics. In other words, rather than just stating: *Hi, I am (not) watching #7dag today*, users make indirect associations with the act of viewing via their expertise or critical opinion on the topics (which is also reported by the interviewees mentioned earlier). Hence, witty written, issue- or actor-based tweets, which initiate from a “You ain’t fooling me” attitude towards these political actors or experts, are highly valued. Aside political debates, ‘De Zevende Dag’ devotes about one-third of its time to sports, culture, media and lifestyle topics. Remarkably, none of the participating Twitter users is motivated to discuss these topics. Whereas sports events (e.g. football games) often yield sustainable Twitter traffic, users do not discuss these topics here. In ‘De Zevende Dag’, the political debates take the form of discussions, led by political journalists who seek a quarrel rather than a consensus. The presentation of sports, lifestyle and media is very different in the sense that it consists of a weekly digest of related events, whereby the guests talk about these events rather than *discussing* them. Hence, the lack of interest or motivation to discuss these issues is related to the format rather than the content as such.

As the second category in Table 16 shows, users rarely engage in meta talk on the program (e.g. the choice of the topics that are discussed or the politicians who are invited). Hence, they mainly follow the agenda put forth by the mass media. They go beyond the media as an institute, the program makers and format and mainly co-discuss the discussions or as Frank (M, 60) states: *It’s like you virtually become part of the debate.*

Last, we would like to address the final and smallest category of messages in Table 16, that is, the tweets that cover the act of audiencing (e.g. “I am watching”) or the other users tweeting about the program. As discussed earlier, the interviewees indicate that they do not regularly consult of the hashtagged Twitter debate. Hence, it comes to no surprise that there are very little references to the other tweeting viewers. Moreover, as we discussed earlier, interactions between users can take place *beyond* the hashtag debate. In addition, for the two last categories of our content analysis, we can argue that

these “rapid responses” (Elmer, 2012) urge people to discuss what they see and hear on the TV, rather than the social setting in which these utterances take place and the format in which these discussions are staged. Nonetheless, the interviewees do point to the conscious act of discussing, scrutinizing and interrogating the doings of these eminent guests. Hence, both cultural and social conventions as well as technological features shape the nature of these mediated practices. In the following, we define and discuss a number of particularities related to social media research and critically reflect upon their meaning and use for audience studies.

### **3.5.5 Conclusion and discussion**

This study investigates Twitter use during a Flemish current affairs program ‘De Zevende Dag’ to understand how people make sense of TV *through* Twitter. We apply a case-study approach to provide an in-depth understanding of mediated viewership in relation to news and current affairs, and political debates in particular. The focus of this paper is to critically examine whether and how audience research (especially qualitative studies) can be applied on Twitter data. Although online data extraction opens up new windows for audience studies, the understanding of their limits and weaknesses is still open. In this respect, we put forth two validity issues related to (1) the technological bias inherent to these digital tools and (2) the performative and selective nature of these digital utterances. To discuss these issues, we rely on the confrontation of manifest behaviour with the singularities of human interpretation. In the following, we elaborate on the validity issues and outline directions for the debate on online data collection and analysis for audience research.

Although digital measures eliminate observer influences, we cannot simply assume that the replacement of the observer with these automated tools results in an increase in validity. The concept of “hyper-coding” (Vittadini & Pasquali, 2014) is of interest here and originates from a discussion on virtual shadowing, that is, a method that combines multiple data sources such as interviews, diaries or pictures. The concept of hyper-coding reflects the need to understand these online practices as “hyper-performative” research materials. As we discussed earlier, these Twitter messages are reflections about TV content but also performances of the self. The status and characteristics of these data sources make them very different from people’s offline meanings, interpretations and conversations (e.g. via in-depth interviews/ethnographic approaches). In this study, we relate performance to (1) the value of the program and (2) the socio-technological structures through which these practices occur. Concerning the former, we believe it is valuable to build upon our current knowledge on TV audiences, such as Alasuutari’s (1992) moral hierarchy of TV programs. The audiences’ reflexive and critical *evaluations* of their viewing behaviour extend towards the practice

of Twitter use whilst viewing, hence, co-define the content and the tone of the messages. Future research on Twitter and TV needs to understand the existing cultural conventions that people use in their discourses about TV programs and how this migrates online. In addition, Alasuutari (1999) suggests that “third-generation” audience studies need to understand how viewers go *beyond* media content, as they also reflect upon media institutes, their reality claims and the act of being an audience member. As we found in this study, these utterances do not occur online. Hence, we would systematically miss out important aspects of the viewer’s narrative on the role of media in everyday life in favour of these rapid and reactive responses on media content.

Concerning Twitter as a socio-technological structure, we understand how its affordances co-define the nature and dynamics of talk on TV. As our participants alluded to, the brevity of the messages, their real-time nature and virtuality co-define the nature of these practices. In addition, they are illustrative of larger sociocultural trends. In a critical essay on our digital media culture, Miller (2008) builds upon Malinowski’s (1923) concept of *phatic communication* to understand how communication via social media has a social function rather than an intention to carry information or substance. Although we do acknowledge Twitter messages as reflections on TV content, they also fit within “*a (cynical) strategy of impression management to the outside world*” (Miller, 2008, p. 389), which can be applied to social media communication in a general sense. Hence, understanding these mediated practices from a traditional audience studies perspective is highly valuable but not sufficient.

Miller (2008) argues that we move towards a conceptualization of the social in terms of tools and technologies rather than a group of humans, which relates to the second validity issue we defined; that is, the exposure to technological bias. In this respect, Manovich (2001) refers to a *database logic*, which is related to the digitization of media and the growth in information brought by the web. This database logic defines how we make meaning out of the world. A database is defined as a structured collection of separate, yet related items, organized for computer management. In this database, each of the items has the same significance. In this respect, we recall the concept of hyper-coding and argue that it not only reflects the performative aspect of these digital utterances, but can also be related to this database logic, in which items have the same meaning. For this study, we particularly think of the use and meaning of the @-sign and the hashtag. The latter is essentially a means to collect and store data; it does not indicate a collective entity of users per se. Otherwise stated, analysis and conceptualization cannot precede data collection. In extension, there is a potential mismatch between “objective structures” (i.e. meta views of these communication structures which are not perceivable as such by the users) and “subjective experiences” (i.e. the way users perceive communication and interaction). In general, we cannot mistake the amount of available data for the *variety* of RQs we can answer. We refer to

the lack of context, for example, socio-demographic descriptions (Baym, 2013) as well as other interesting social media data; that is, reading other users' hashtagged messages.

We propose a final interpretation of the concept of “hyper-coding”, as we recall the insignificance users attribute to their utterances on politicians and societal issues. We come to wonder how to value these social media texts within democracy. In this respect, we question whether viewers can be conceptualized as citizens, reflecting engaged, informed and participating agents (Livingstone, 2005). More specifically, we refer to Couldry's (2010) critical essay on the value of *voice* in contemporary democracy and the role of media technologies therein. Social media technologies provide opportunities to express dissatisfaction with the government, but can they be valued in the policy-making process? We revise an earlier reference to Rosanvallon's (2008) concept of surveillance and oversight, of which denunciation (or criticism) is a primary model. For now, we can state that Twitter users call for criticism *without consequence*, as they feel the need to utter their discontents but do not expect or call for particular changes or actions based upon their utterances. This relates to the fact that these utterances are reflections as well as representations of the self.

In general, the discussion unfolded a number of particularities related to the use of social media data for audience studies (and social sciences in general). To conclude, we argue that we need to push the debate beyond the advantages and limitations of the social media (in relation to the existing methodological toolbox) towards *ontological* and *epistemological* understanding of these digital objects and the data structures in which they are embedded. Do we understand the way these digital objects and pre-ordered data structures model the world? Manovich (2001) refers to the concept of “transcoding”, which reflects the translation of information from one layer, that is, the computer layer (reflecting the *database logic* we discussed), to another, that is, the cultural layer (i.e. the sociocultural meaning and categories). In extension, theorization of digital media as a methodology, and more specifically as data objects, is needed.



# Chapter 4

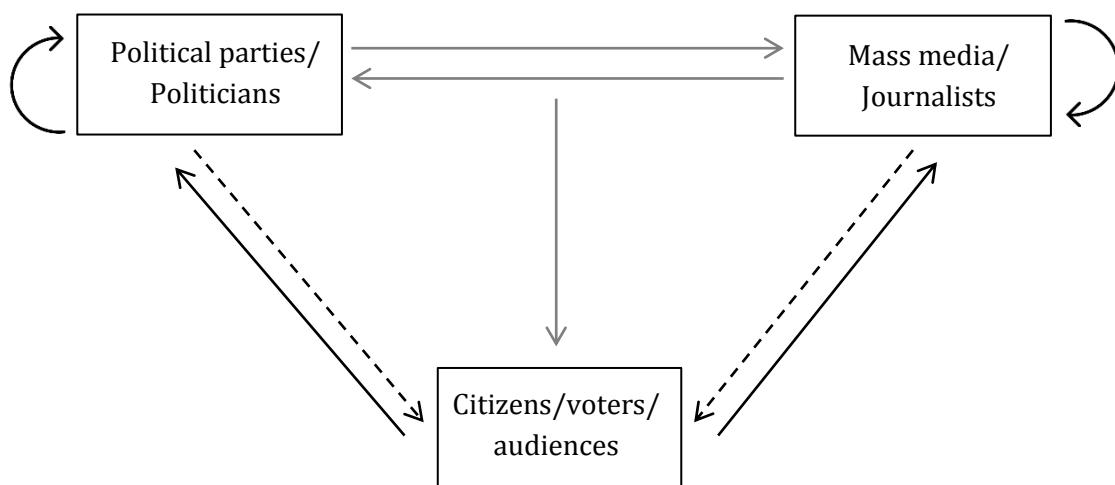
## Conclusion and discussion

*The final chapter of this thesis summarizes the findings from the empirical studies in relation to the aim and research questions of this thesis. In addition, we specify our conceptual, methodological and practical contributions, followed by the limitations of the work performed and suggestions for future research.*

## 4.1 Key findings

This thesis investigated the impact of social media on the systems framework of political communication. We resume the triadic model and discuss how social media have altered it. Figure 9 shows that the relation among politics, the mass media and the public is *expanded* rather than *reconfigured*. The grey lines represent the original framework and the black lines (both solid and dashed) are added, based on the research we executed.

Figure 9 The expansion of the systems framework of political communication



Social media add voices to the framework, as citizens generate upward communication flows directed at political and media actors. The solid black lines illustrate this in Figure 9. However, both politicians and journalists do not engage in direct communication with citizens in an equal manner, as represented by the dashed lines in Figure 9. Our two large-scale Twitter studies on the 2012 and the 2014 elections have shown that the conversation networks mostly consist of citizens. However, it is politicians and journalists that take central positions in the debate, as they receive most attention. Attention comes from citizens, who are more likely to address politicians and journalists, rather than to communicate amongst themselves.

The dashed lines we added in Figure 9 also relate to the findings from Studies III and IV included in this thesis. First, Study III showed politicians do not necessarily engage in a direct dialogue with citizens via social media. Politicians do provide “behind the scenes” insights in their professional lives, albeit predominantly in a broadcast manner. Second, Study IV showed interaction between the ‘Terzake’ journalists and the audience does occur, but is separated from journalistic work via the appointment of a dedicated conversation manager. The content of individual viewers’ messages has no direct impact on the production of news.

The existing communication flows between politicians and journalists, as presented by the grey lines in Figure 9, do not cease to exist. The large-scale Twitter studies show dense communication patterns between both actors. Further, in Study III, we found that politicians use social media to attract journalists' attention. Last, self-referential arrows are added in Figure 9 for politicians and journalists. Our two large-scale Twitter studies showed dense relations amongst politicians and amongst mass media. Politicians make reference to party members to enhance the party's visibility on social media and critique rival party members. Further, mass news media promote their own outlets, other media outlets and journalists.

In sum, social media build on established social structures. Politicians and journalists keep their positions as primary information creators and broadcasters, and citizens hold their position as information receivers. Does this mean social media have no influence at all? No. It is in the expansion, and more specifically in the *inadvertent consequences* of the expansion of the systems framework that we find the impact of social media. Below, we elaborate on four inadvertent consequences of the expansion of the communication flows within the systems framework of political communication. These consequences are closely tied to the nature of social media communication, in other words, the logic of social media. In particular, we address the changing context social media generate for political communication.

First, to recapitulate, social media do not replace mass media as politicians still rely on the latter to communicate with the public. As shown in Study III, Politicians acknowledge journalists are amongst their audiences on Twitter and subsequently tailor some of their activity towards journalists. Social media expand the possibilities for politicians to reach journalists, resulting in an increase in public statements as well as the temporal disruption and the acceleration of the news cycle. Politicians decide to communicate when timing is suited for them.

Second, the increase in public statements makes politicians increasingly visible. Social media provide opportunities for image building, but equally challenge politicians in the presentation of their online identities. Not only journalists, but also citizens publically scrutinize politicians' statements, reactions or lack of reactions (as shown in Study V on the tweeting viewer for example). For politicians, this presents a new kind of "fragility" (Thompson, 2005, p. 42). Thompson (2005) acknowledges the double-edged sword of mediated visibility (originally linked to television), as it provides opportunities as well as challenges for politicians.

Third, social media users act as "secondary gatekeepers", as they collectively make visible and evaluate journalistic content via likes, shares or retweets (Singer, 2014). Audience feedback is considered relevant in the newsroom as journalists ought to speak

on behalf of the public. In addition, news organisations are concerned with audience reach. Study IV in particular showed audiences' individual messages have limited influence on the production of news. However, social media users' aggregated activity does have impact as an additional audience metric and/or a representation of the public debate.

Fourth, we acknowledge the fragmentation of the audience. Via social media, users can construct their personal publics, selecting the users they wish to follow and the content they wish to include (Schmidt, 2014). Politicians might be able to bypass media and communicate with citizens directly, but it is more difficult to attract a wider public, and in extension, the undecided voter. Journalists are equally dependent on the activity of a self-selective Twitter audience, reflecting a selection of Twitter users, a selection of the viewing audience (in the case of 'Terzake') and a selection of the public.

The consequences outlined above have little to do with the specific content of social media messages, but primarily speak from the underlying structures and processes characterizing social media (i.e. the context it creates for the content). In this respect, we can argue that "*the medium is the message*" (McLuhan, 1964; McLuhan & Fiore, 1967). The use of McLuhan's quote here does not reflect technological naivety or simplicity. Following Logan (2013), who makes a convincing case countering the charges of technological determinism that were laid upon McLuhan, the quote is valuable for the following reasons. First, the impact of social media is sought in the medium (i.e. its logic) primary to (but without excluding) the content. Second, social media are understood as environments. Social media change existing environments and generate new conditions, which are both technological and socio-cultural in nature. These changes (or inadvertent consequences as I labelled them) define the impact of social media. Third, social media are extensions of humans, meaning technology and user activity are highly interlinked. It is the user that brings his or her personal experience and perceptions to interact with technology, which in turn changes it. In this respect, McLuhan argues "*the user is the content*" (McLuhan & Nevitt, 1972) which - translated to the context of the internet - literally means the creation of online content but also deciding on the content created by others (Levinson, 2003).

## 4.2 Key contributions

### 4.2.1 Conceptual contributions

In this thesis, we conceive social media as a field that is separate from but interacts with politics and mass media. In addition, we build on Esser's (2013) concept of news media logic to define the logic of social media. Both field and logic are meso-level concepts, as they reflect the analytical level between society and individuals. The conceptualization of society as a collection of interrelated fields accounts for the differentiated nature of media influence. The influence of social media on politics and mass media always interacts with the workings and motives that guide behaviour in the respective fields.

The conceptualization of social media logic is an emerging and on-going effort, which contributes to the innovation of the mediatization framework. The current framework predominantly focuses on mass media, whereas new media are met with ambivalence, both in terms of their impact and integration in the existing framework of media logic (e.g. Esser, 2013). Our conceptual distinction acknowledges that the concept of media logic cannot cover all media (Couldry, 2012).

This thesis accounts for the different aspects and driving forces of social media and mass media. These aspects are not only technological, but also socio-cultural and economic in nature. Whereas we acknowledge both mass media and social media logic are interlinked in reality, we argue it is fruitful to distinguish both logics analytically. First, it allows us to understand the influence of social media on politics in a way that is comparable to the influence of mass media on politics. Second, it allows us to understand how social media influence mass media, allowing for a more specific analysis of the ways in which social media and mass media differ, complement or contradict each other. In Study III for example, we conceptualized a number of distinct and overlapping dimensions of mass media and social media logic in the light of the empirical study of politicians' use of social media during election times.

Last, we would like to highlight that the concept of social media logic points to the non-neutrality of social media without resorting in dystopism or utopism. Larsson and Svensson (2014) argue to move beyond dichotomized perspectives to study politicians' use of the internet and social media in particular. More specifically, they call for "middle-ground alternatives". The concept of social media logic provides such an alternative, as it outlines a number of dimensions of social media that provide opportunities as well as challenges for political communication. Further, these dimensions can be applied in empirical research. The influence of social media logic lies in the perceptions and actions of politicians and journalists. Hence, social media logic does not equal social media

influence; rather it is a means to study the influence of social media. Our empirical work did not only apply but also contributes to the further development of the framework of social media logic.

### **4.2.2 Methodological contributions**

In this thesis, we relied on social media data to study transformations in political communication. Since the use of social media data for social-scientific research is still emerging, this thesis makes explicit a number of political, ethical and analytical issues to contextualize social media research. Further, we put additional effort in the validation of the findings retrieved from social media data.

First, Studies I and II are comparable in their methodological approach. Both studies discuss the election debate on Twitter and are based on similar data collection and analytical approaches. The correspondence in the results between both studies contributes to the reliability of the findings. Further, the combination of social media data and offline inquiry accounts for the validity of the findings. The interpretation of social media objects as hashtags, likes or @replies is not always straightforward and social media data only provide behavioural insights. Last, we integrated different entry points to study the transformation of the systems framework as politics, the media and the public were subject of inquiry, combined and separately.

We investigated two Twitter objects in more detail; that is, hashtags and @replies within hashtagged debates. For nearly all of our studies, we relied on the hashtag for the collection of Twitter data. Although it is a commonly applied method for Twitter research, it is considered to have drawbacks with respect to the inclusion of follow-up messages that do not contain the hashtag (Bruns & Moe, 2014). We investigated the hashtag as a sampling method in our qualitative work on the tweeting viewer (in Study V) and for the 2014 elections (as discussed in Chapter 2). Hashtags are essentially a means to collect and store data, but do not necessarily indicate a collective entity of users. Further, hashtags reveal only part of the conversation taking place between users as a lot of replies do not contain hashtags.

In line with the emergence of social media data, the popularity of SNA approaches has increased. In 2012, Larsson and Moe were amongst the first to publish findings on the election debate on Twitter, using the visualization software Gephi and presenting a discussion of the high-end users. Since then, Twitter research has evolved towards more advanced, statistical approaches (Jungherr, 2015; Jürgens & Jungherr, 2016). This thesis contributes to the evolution towards more formalized SNA approaches within social media research, using statistical software. Still, there are quite some issues about SNA

and social media data that are yet to be fully explored (e.g. data sampling and statistical significance testing).

### 4.2.3 Practical contributions

Whereas we are inclined to argue that both politicians and journalists should embrace social media, the inadvertent consequences of the expansion of systems framework point to a number of challenges. Without presenting an all too dystopian future, we argue that the expansion of communication flows does not necessarily contribute to the well-functioning of democracy. In this respect, we follow Dean (2003), who takes a critical stance against the alleged visibility ICTs provide and their presumed indispensability. The abundance of information and continuous, conflicting updates can result in uninformed, unsure and infinite judgement.

Overall, we argue *less is more*. Social media are here to stay, but their integration in the news cycle is not always desirable. Within journalism studies, scholars have argued in favour of slowness (Craig, 2015; Masurier, 2015). Slow journalism serves as a corrective to the 24/7 news production process, emphasizing reflection and investigation. Here, we particularly point to the use of social media in news coverage. As argued in the popular press; “*Social media ≠ publieke opinie*” [Social media does not equal public opinion]<sup>1</sup> and “*Waarom we Twitter moeten negeren*” [Sometimes we should ignore Twitter]<sup>2</sup>. Commotion on social media is a means for journalists to gauge the significance of particular events (Paulussen & Harder, 2014). However, the dynamics and users behind “Twitter eruptions” are less visible. Below, we provide a few considerations to take into account.

“*Citizens who use Twitter during television events are a vocal minority*” (Anstead & O’Loughlin, 2011, p. 458). In Flanders, Twitter use amongst the population is up to 19% and mostly reflects younger men (iMinds-iLab.o, 2015). Aside the fact that Twitter users are not representative for the population, they do not necessarily represent the viewing audience either. This does not mean that tweets have no value altogether. The question is whether and when they should be recognized. In order to account for Twitter comments and considerations, we argue for (1) additional profile information about social media users and (2) conceptual and empirical bridges between social media

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<sup>1</sup> D’heer, E. (2015, February 3). Social media ≠ publieke opinie. *De Redactie (VRT)*. Retrieved from <http://deredactie.be>

<sup>2</sup> Duits, L. & Vliegenthart, R. (2014, December 27). *Waarom we Twitter moeten negeren*. *NRC Handelsblad*. Retrieved from <http://www.ncr.nl>

metrics and existing audience metrics. Viewing rates and audience traits (gathered via a survey or qualitative research) can be compared with insights from Twitter users, who can be asked to answer an online survey including variables measuring socio-demographics, interest in news and politics and motivations to tweet. To conclude, we would like to emphasize that the number of tweets a program receives does not equal its general value or importance. A program as 'Het Journaal' [the daily news bulletin] is watched daily by a large and diverse audience, but hardly generates Twitter activity. On the other hand, 'Terzake', a political debate program aired on the specialist channel of the public broadcaster generates considerably more Twitter activity. This is not related to its popularity (as it speaks to a much smaller audience), but rather stems from its format (i.e. debate and discussion).

Twitter eruptions are the result of user behaviour interacting with the techno-economic dimension of Twitter. Whereas Twitter is not entirely transparent about the working of its trending topics algorithm, we do know it builds on the consistent use of a dedicated hashtag that is widely distributed on the platform in a relatively short amount of time.<sup>3</sup> However, as rightfully argued by van Dijck and Poell (2014), issues that arise from Twitter do not necessarily match the public interest. First, not all public issues lend themselves towards captivating hashtags that can go viral online. Second, Twitter trends can be subject to manipulation as well. Our study on politicians' use of social media revealed that politicians try to make hashtags trending as it allows them to retrieve mass media coverage for particular topics or events that are of interest to them.

Journalists get the feeling Twitter is there for them to get shoved, shouted down and insulted. However, our study on 'De Zevende Dag' showed that the vast majority of the Twitter messages concern the program content. Viewers co-discuss the political debate, debunking politicians' arguments, style and ideology. Journalists are not necessarily aware of the bigger picture. Their perceptions are based on viewer activity directed to them personally (via the use of @replies or @mentions to their accounts). However, when situated in the broader collection of message on the program, critique becomes much less prominent. Based on interviews with journalists working for the current affairs program 'Terzake', we found that they *underestimate* the total amount of Twitter messages sent about the program, but *overestimate* the interaction that is taking place (i.e. @replies/@mentions).

When interpreting feedback from tweeting viewers, the content of individual messages should not be overemphasized. The act of tweeting in itself is the content.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://support.twitter.com/articles/20172701>



People watch to tweet and wish to make visible associations with political debates. In addition, we need to account for the playful, performative and entertaining nature of Twitter users' activities. They do not intend or wish to behave as journalists. Further, they do not necessarily speak as citizens either. Miller (2008) points to social media's social function, rather than an intention to carry information or substance. As previously mentioned, the integration of Twitter messages with offline audience research provides useful additional perspectives for practitioners, as it nuances viewers' utterances and accounts for the mediated nature of these audience practices.

Last, politicians both contribute to and are subject to the close relation between social media and mass media. As discussed in the introduction chapter of this thesis, Rosa (2013) talks about the "desynchronization" of politics. Social and technological changes exceed political institutions' potential to keep up. Not only political decision-making is challenging. The balance between political work and communicating about it to the wider public is under pressure as well. In other words: *"Where, within the ubiquity of democratic surveillance, can political practices hitherto confined to the back room be conducted?"* (Coleman, 2011, p. 54). These concerns were uttered during our interviews with politicians as well. Also in the popular press, we find examples of the challenges politicians face related to social media: *"Theo Francken moet leren zwijgen"* [Minister Francken needs to know when to shut up]<sup>4</sup> and *"Misschien moeten ministers weer langzame reacties overwegen. En even nadenken"* [Maybe politicians need to restrain from reacting sometimes]<sup>5</sup>. As Davis (2010) argues, politicians are overwhelmed by the increase in communication. As a result they seek for ways to make themselves less available, for example by outsourcing these activities to communication staff. This is ironic in the sense that it undermines the idea of social media being different from mass media, as the former allow direct contact with policy makers. Further, visibility does not equal transparency when social media become sites of political authenticity (Gaden & Dumitrica, 2014). Social media presence might show a more human self, but it is strategic in the sense that it serves the self rather than the other.

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<sup>4</sup> Cattebeke, H. & Justaert, M. (2015, September 9). 'Theo Francken moet leren zwijgen'. *Het Nieuwsblad*. Retrieved from <http://www.nieuwsblad.be>

<sup>5</sup> Meeus, T. (2016, January 21). 'De opkomst van babbelzieke politici'. *NCR Handelsblad*. Retrieved from <http://www.nrc.nl>

## 4.3 Limitations and directions for future research

### 4.3.1 Social media and political communication

*“Social media seem to be accompanied by a lot of bullshit because we know so little and because there is a lot at stake” (Nielsen, 2015, p. 2)*

Whereas this thesis aimed to reduce at least some of the “bullshit”, there is still quite some work ahead. Below, we outline a few lines of research, building on the work executed in this thesis.

We acknowledge the slow but steady integration of social media in politicians’ routines, characterized by *“a number of experimental strategies”* (Coleman, Moss, & Parry, 2015, p. 6). Whereas the importance of social media is recognized, its use and integration are still in progress. Political marketing and PR will co-evolve with the changing media ecology, providing fruitful avenues for future research. Based on in-depth interviews with politicians, we find very early signs of what Tufekci (2014b) labels as “engineering the public”. The expansion of citizen activity in the political debate increases the data commercialized through social media and used by politicians for individualized targeting. Therefore, social media platforms themselves provide interesting avenues for research, both in terms of analytics and advertising possibilities offered to politicians.<sup>6</sup> Related, the parties’ integration of social media, in terms of budget, strategies and targets provides interesting research opportunities not accounted for in this thesis. For now, the interviews with politicians showed limited guidance from the party and the absence of individual targets. Hence, there is quite some room for evolution and consequently, academic research.

In addition to party-level strategies and tactics, we point to the differences in the (successful) use of social media between individual politicians. In this thesis, the differences between politicians are only accounted for to a very limited extent. However, quantitative studies have shown that age or incumbency for example are meaningfully related to Facebook and Twitter use (Larsson & Kalsnes, 2014; Strandberg, 2013; Vergeer, Hermans, & Cunha, 2013). Based on our interviews with politicians, we argue that platform-related variables could be relevant predictors of activity. Examples are experience, perceived savviness and interest in social media. Concerning Twitter in

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<sup>6</sup> Facebook allows for the promotion and advertising of one’s content at relatively low cost and towards well-defined audiences (<https://www.facebook.com/business/a/politics-industry>). Twitter also offers possibilities for campaign ads (<https://support.twitter.com/articles/20170492?lang=en>).

particular, research has shown experience on the platform (rather than party age or personal variables as gender) is a relevant predictor of activity (Vergeer & Hermans, 2013). Whereas we predominantly relied on the combination of in-depth interviews and behavioural data, the use of survey data would be an interesting add-on here.

Our empirical work on mass media focused on the public broadcaster VRT. In Belgium and other Northern European countries, publically funded broadcasters take dominant positions. For public broadcasters, the professional aspects of news media logic are more pronounced than the commercial aspects (Esser, 2013; Phillips, 2014). However, this does not mean that public broadcasters can ignore TV ratings and in extension, their social media audiences. They need to remain relevant for the wider public and the changing ways in which people consume and interact with news. Yet, our research would benefit from the inclusion of commercial players (both newspapers and commercial broadcasters) to make stronger claims about the integration and impact of visible audience behaviour in the newsroom. In analogy with Tufekci's (2014b) "engineering the public", news organisations can rely on online data to "engineer the audience". Computer programs and algorithms allow for news prioritization and presentation based on detailed audience metrics (such as clicks, shares or likes). They are part of a broader evolution and emerging field of study; that is, computational journalism. The field operates at the nexus of journalism and computer sciences and requires us to focus on technical staff and companies involved in the provision of data and/or services as well as journalists' integration and interpretation of these tools (Anderson, 2013; Diakopoulos, 2015). Possible questions are: What control do these stakeholders have? What biases are built into these systems? As briefly touched upon in Study IV, we encounter the role of third-party translators of audience data such as commercial companies selling aggregated audience metrics and accompanying rhetoric but keeping the detailed records themselves.

Social media do not only allow citizens to make themselves visible, but also allow them to function as "visibility entrepreneurs", co-defining the visibility of content and users online (Dayan, 2013, p. 145). Politicians as well as other actors in power can generate visibility via "astroturfing" (Zhang, Carpenter, & Ko, 2013). Astroturfing reflects the attempt to generate the illusion of popularity and support on Twitter, a practice already known to happen on online fora and comment sections. Its application on Twitter works via the generation of a set of profiles that (semi-) automatically (re)tweet tweets. It gives the appearance that a lot of people share the same views (what we usually refer to as virality), but in reality activity is generated and organized by bots and/or paid-for accounts. A better understanding of the characteristics, techniques and use of astroturfing would be valuable for scholars and practitioners, especially if social media are conceived as a proxy for the public opinion (Anstead & O'Loughlin, 2015).

This thesis conceptualized and studied citizens in relation to, but outside the political and the journalistic field. However, we can equally argue for a more hybrid or fluid conception of media and politics. Bennett (2015) denounces the dominance of media and political elites in political communication research. Via the “logic of connective action”, Bennett and Segerberg (2012) capture the changing nature of politics, as connected individuals mobilize around personal values to engage with societal issues as human rights or fair trade. In addition, authors as Jenkins (2006), Deuze (2006; 2008) and Schudson (1999) take a more radical stance on the notion of civic participation. These authors tailor their work to the emerging post-modern conditions, as described in the introduction chapter (e.g. Rosa, 2003, Bauman, 2000). Citizens do not merely receive political messages, but co-produce them. Informal political talk is intertwined with aspects and practices of everyday life and contains personal and affective elements. In Study V, we found that social media discussion of televised political debates is not necessarily aimed at influencing politics. Rather, discussion is entertaining, driven by personal motives and contains performative elements. However, the use of humour, irony or even memes to discuss politics indicates the changing nature of political communication. In this respect, the study of online visuals provides an interesting avenue for research. Related, the temporal flow of topics and themes is an interesting, yet challenging avenue for research as well. Social media content is produced continuously, hence, acquires descriptive and explanatory analyses accounting for the flow of information and communication. Last, the combination of online data and offline inquiry into citizens’ opinions, voting behaviour or other offline forms of political participation would be highly valuable to account for the overlap and divergence of “new” and “old” practices and in extension, define the political character of online practices.

### **4.3.2 Social media and social-scientific research**

In this final sub-section, we outline two challenges concerning the use of social media data for social-scientific research. The first challenge is related to the politics of data access and skills and the second challenge is related to the fickle nature of social media and the necessity to secure longitudinal insights.

In an “*ideal study*”, we would start from “*a specific set of research questions and query the data in accordance with them*” (Gaffney & Puschmann, 2014, p. 64). In practice, we try to balance the opportunities and limitations of the data and the research questions we have in mind. As researchers we are encountered with the limitations concerning data retrieval from social media. Our focus on Twitter rather than Facebook is in part related to the possibilities Twitter offers for data retrieval and the public nature of the platform. The application of SNA on Facebook data is limited due to privacy issues, and

related, the limited amount of data that can be retrieved. Further, we acknowledge that the collected datasets do not necessarily include all messages about the topic under investigation. However, we do not know what data is missing, since we draw from undefined populations. We can only describe what we have, but we don't know how it relates to the broader population from which we draw the sample. In short, as Tufekci (2014, p. 507) rightly stresses: “*we select on the dependent variable*”; that is, the presence of a particular hashtag or keyword. There is no need to sample since  $N = \text{all}$ . Therefore, the construction of a “Flemish Twittersphere” would serve as an interesting alternative starting point to investigate the election debate (or other hashtag-based discussions on Twitter) in Flanders.

Social media data are first and foremost open for commercial use. In particular, we point to the advent of a vast amount of companies that commercialize social media data. In Flanders, ‘Talking Heads’ and ‘Engagor’ are two such companies. Both companies were mentioned in newspaper articles discussing politicians’ social media flaws and successes during the 2014 election campaign, for example “N-VA kampioen van de sociale media” [N-VA is social media champion].<sup>7</sup> Whereas mass media coverage of politicians is a time-intensive task, executed within universities (e.g. Steunpunt Media), social media presence is accessible for everyone to measure. Here, “everyone” means actors that have the techno-economic structures to provide large-scale statistics on an almost real-time basis. In the US, Twitter created a dedicated account for the presidential primaries (i.e. @gov), with the user description “updates from the @Twitter Government and Election team”. It provides regular updates about the debates and popularity ranks of the candidates. These descriptives can be an interesting starting point for researchers. However, since we have no access to the data and since the data come from commercial entities, we cannot control for their accuracy. Does it make sense to collect the data ourselves then? Or do we focus on other issues and questions related to social media data, such as an in-depth reading of the content, the use of offline data or social network analysis? Further, do we provide a critical response to the analytics they produce or do we cooperate? These questions are not easily answered, but will become more prominent as the field of social media research evolves.

In addition to the data divide between social scientists and commercial entities, we acknowledge computer scientists are more apt to deal with social media data. However, working with computer scientists is challenging as they search for different contributions in the data and might not always recognize what is interesting from a

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<sup>7</sup> Vanrompay, S. (2014, Mai 22). N-VA kampioen van de sociale media. *De Standaard*. Retrieved from <http://www.standaard.be>

social-scientific perspective (Petchler & González-Bailón, 2015). There might be instances where a collaboration is beneficial, both methodologically (e.g. to construct and manage large and complex datasets) as well as conceptually (e.g. to understand the role and use algorithms or concepts as astroturfing). In addition, we recognize a technological background and/or being able to code becomes valuable for social scientists as well. For now, technological profiles are predominantly sought outside social sciences (Petchler & González-Bailón, 2015). However, communication departments will evolve towards the integration of these methods and skills in their own programs. The execution of online research will evolve towards more formalized, technical procedures and documentation of the collection and processing of online data (e.g. missing data and data reduction). In addition to technological and analytical skills, data validity and reliability will become important issues to tackle. Social scientists often focus on rather abstract concepts such as power, which are no exact match to digital objects as retweets, likes or other. Empirical investigation and conceptualization are in order to address these issues.

Media have never been static but the pace with which social media (can) alter increases. We need to think about ways to secure the value of our research even when these platforms cease to exist. Twitter evolved from “What are you doing?” to “What’s happening?” (van Dijck, 2011). In addition, Facebook has extended the like button to what is named “reactions” allowing for a broader set of responses. In short, the platforms we study today will look very different tomorrow. They might not even be around. Conceptual work needs to envision the long-term value of our research. This thesis made a contribution in that direction, formulating a logic that runs across social media. Medium theory will become a relevant companion for communication scholars in times ahead, especially since media technologies intersect with an ever growing number of social spheres.

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