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Anders Larsson

Hallvard Moe

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WHO TWEETS? TRACKING MICROBLOGGING USE IN THE 2010 SWEDISH ELECTION CAMPAIGN

Larsson, Anders Olof, Uppsala University, Department of Informatics and Media, PO box 513, 753 13 Uppsala, Sweden, anders.larsson@im.uu.se

Moe, Hallvard, University of Bergen, Department of Information Science and Media Studies, PO box 7802, N-5020 Bergen, Norway, hallvard.moe@infomedia.uib.no

Abstract

Among the many so called microblogging services that allow their respective users to describe their current status in short posts, Twitter is probably among the most popular and well known. Since its launch in 2006, Twitter use has evolved and is increasingly used in a variety of contexts. One area of use is politics. Although many of the initial hopes for “e-democracy” appear to have gone unfulfilled, the successful employment of the Internet during the 2008 US presidential campaign has yet again raised voices claiming that the Internet, and particularly “social media” applications like Twitter, provides interesting opportunities for online campaigning and deliberation. This paper presents a study on Twitter use during the 2010 Swedish general election. The analysis is focused on identifying user types and how these high-end users make use of the Twitter service. By providing results regarding Twitter use before, during and after the height of the Swedish election campaign, this paper provides important insights into the practice of civic microblogging.

Keywords: Twitter, Web 2.0, Online politics, Social media, Sweden.
1 Introduction

Although initially geared towards short, personal status updates, the microblog service Twitter is increasingly used in a variety of contexts and for various reasons, often going beyond answering the suggested question of "What’s happening?". This development can be likened to that of "regular" blogging. Indeed, similar patterns of use seem to emerge – for private or leisure as well as for more professional pursuits (Nardi, Schiano, & Gumbrecht, 2004). As with the Internet itself, blogging and microblogging have been viewed as having the potential for increasing political participation among previously unengaged citizens (e.g. Castells, 2007, p. 255) Although many of these initial hopes for “e-democracy” (Chadwick, 2008; Hilbert, 2009) have gone unfulfilled, the successful employment of the Internet during the 2008 Obama US presidential campaign has again raised voices claiming that “social media” applications such as Twitter provide new opportunities for online campaigning (Smith, 2009). As such, there is a pertinent need for empirical studies to examine how a service like Twitter contributes to a broadening of public debate, and to what extent it merely serves as yet another arena for already established societal actors. Indeed, previous research has suggested that studies look into microblog use that goes beyond the characterization of “interesting novelty” (Honeycutt & Herring, 2009, p. 10), and Twitter, given its popularity and status, appears to be an ideal candidate for such studies (Jansen, Zhang, Sobel, & Chowdury, 2009, p. 2173). Importantly, such empirical endeavours need to acknowledge the contextual differences in political communication among distinct polities. This means that methodologically, studies need to enable a comprehensive, yet case-specific, look at Twitter practices.

This paper presents a study on Twitter use during the 2010 Swedish general election. As an established democracy with high levels of freedom of speech, high numbers of Internet use and ICT penetration as well as high election turnout, the Swedish political context represents an interesting case: Assumingly, the Swedish election campaign would provide favourable conditions for the employment of a novel Internet tool such as Twitter. By archiving tweets tagged as relevant for the election at hand using the TwapperKeeper application, data was collected for a comprehensive study of political Twitter use. In total, 99,832 tweets dealing with the election are analyzed, focusing on the various users present in the “Twittersphere”, the networks that appear between these users and the conversations that they take part in. By providing findings on Twitter use before, during and after the height of the Swedish election campaign, this paper provides important insights into the practice of civic microblogging. Moreover, by utilizing social network analyses of a large dataset collected with the aid of emerging online applications, the study contributes to the development of the methodological toolbox for research.

2 Background

As a microblogging service, Twitter can be understood as a derivative or miniature version of the regular blog. Due to similarities between blogging and microblogging, the following section outlines the growth of blogging in general, and political blogging in particular. Following this, the characteristics of the Twitter microblogging service is discussed in conjunction with a review of the research that has been performed looking into the phenomenon at hand.

2.1 Political blogging

Blogging has received quite a lot of attention, both in various media outlets (Jones & Himelboim, 2010) and among academics (Larsson & Hrastinski, 2009). Remembering the claim that “Technology is often viewed as a key driver of change in the electoral arena” (Gibson, Lusoli, & Ward, 2008, p. 15)
the extent to which researchers have focused on political aspects of blogging should come as no
surprise (Kerbel & Bloom, 2005) (Sweetser Trammell, 2007). Use of blogs for political purposes has
been studied from the point of view of the citizen (looking to discuss political matters with peers), as
well as from the point of view of the elected official (looking to connect with the electorate).

First, politically interested citizens who enter the blogosphere have been labelled "technoactivists" in
search of outlets for "democratic self-expression and networking" (Kahn & Kellner, 2004, p. 15). Blog
use has been found to be an important predictor of online political engagement (Gil De Zuniga, Puig-I-
Abril, & Rojas, 2009), and reasons for blogging appear to go beyond more intrinsic motivations. In
their survey of top US political bloggers, Ekdale et al (2010) found that extrinsic motivations for
blogging (i.e. providing alternatives to mainstream media outlets or to influence public opinion) were
among the top reasons for maintaining a political blog. However, in his study on the potential for
blogs to foster democratic discourse in the US context, Davis concluded that blogs and similar online
applications could be problematic as public discussion forums since they were marred by problems
like "exclusion of others, flaming [and] a great deal of anonymity" (Davis, 2005, p. 119).

Second, political parties and their candidates have also entered the blogosphere to "engage with
supporters and the wider public" (Gibson, et al., 2008, p. 16) Although there are indications that such
activities have in fact fostered new channels for politicians to connect with an increasingly jaded
electorate (e.g. Foot & Schneider, 2006) many political actors appear to struggle with their presence
on the Internet. Perhaps due to the "tradeoff between information control and interactive engagement"
(Druckman, Kifer, & Parkin, 2007, p. 428), studies have found that political actors are careful when
venturing online, limiting the options for voter co-creation and interaction and making more use of
traditional, informing features (e.g. Vaccari, 2008a; Vaccari, 2008b). As such, the majority of online
action by political actors has been likened to an "electronic brochure" (Jackson & Lilleker, 2009),
indicating that little adaptation to the online format have taken place.

Although studies have found politicians to apparently mainly use blogs as "campaign gimmicks"
(Lilleker & Malagón, 2010, p. 26), hopes are still held high regarding the use of online services for
political purposes (Vaccari, 2008a). The potential for blogs and other, similar services to create ties
between the electorate and the elected should perhaps not be underestimated is also transferred to
microblogging services like Twitter.

2.2 Twitter

"Microblogs are short comments usually delivered to a network of associates” (Jansen, et al., 2009, p.
2170). Twitter is no different. By sending short messages – tweets – of up to 140 characters each,
Twitter users share these updates to a network of followers. Compared to similar services, the act of
"following" another Twitter user is not automatically reciprocal. A user can follow any number of
other users, although the user being followed does not necessarily have to follow back.

Twitter users have utilized the open-ended character of the service to go beyond the intended uses. For
dexample, Twitter users accommodate alternative forms of use by annotating their tweets with different
characters in order to signify a specific form of communication. To make conversations, the @ sign is
used as a marker of addressivity. For example, posting a message including @USERNAME indicates
that the message is intended for or somehow relevant to a specific user. Retweets (RT) refers to the
practice of resending a tweet posted by another user. Following the typology suggested by Kwak et al
(2010), a tweet can be classified as a Singleton (a statement from a specific user, no @ sign present); a
Mention or a Reply (@ sign followed by a user ID) or a Retweet, as mentioned earlier (marked with
“RT”). Tweets can also include hashtags, where the # character is used in conjunction with a word or
phrase in order to connect the tweet to a particular theme. This use of the # sign allows users to search
the “Twittersphere” for specific topics of interest and to follow threads of discussion.
2.2.1 Everyday Twitter use

While a number of more or less unique uses of the service have been reported, such as the case of an American student jailed in Egypt who used Twitter to signal distress, or the messages sent by a passenger on the US Airways plane that crashed into the Hudson river (Kwak, et al., 2010), (Larsson & Hrastinski, 2009) academic research on Twitter use is at a very early stage. A few distinct categories of Twitter use have been identified in the literature. Researchers have focused on describing the everyday uses of the service. For example, Java et al (2007) identified four categories of Twitter use: Daily chatter, posts regarding daily events and thoughts; Conversations using the @ character; Sharing information where URLs are distributed via the posts and Reporting news, where “users report latest news or comment about current events” (Java, et al., 2007). (Honeycutt & Herring, 2009) employed a grounded theory approach on their sample and found 12 distinct categories of tweets: About addressee, Announce/advertise, Exhort, Information for others, Information for self, Metacommentary, Media use, Opinion, Other’s experience, Self experience, Solicit information and Other. Although more finely grained, these 12 categories roughly correspond to the previous four, indicating reliability in the results of previous research.

2.2.2 Political Twitter use

Besides studying the uses of Twitter in a variety of everyday contexts, researchers have identified a variety of professional Twitter uses (Grace, Zhao, & boyd, 2010). Recently, researchers have studied political microblog (i.e. Twitter) use, with studies focusing on either non-parliamentary or parliamentary uses of the service. As for non-parliamentary uses, the notion of "Twitter revolutions" in totalitarian countries has been introduced, although the exact contents and effects of these uprisings are disputed. For example, Gaffney studied Twitter use during the 2009 Iran elections by tracking the use of the #IranElection hashtag. Although Twitter helped protesters in Iran and around the world in organizing their efforts, the author claims that "it is difficult to say with any certainty what the role of Twitter was" (Gaffney, 2010). Evgeny Morozov (2009) is not as coy in his criticisms of what he claims is the hyperbole surrounding Twitter use during the Iran election. Following Morozov, the Iranian Twitter revolution is "a myth, dreamed up and advanced by cyber-utopian Western commentators" (p. 11). It’s all media hype, the product of a global Twitterati with little or no insight into the actual protests and processes that went down in Teheran.

While studying Twitter use in political hotbeds like Iran provides insights into political microblogging, other, more politically stable contexts should be placed under scrutiny as well. A number of studies focusing on different parliamentary uses of Twitter have been published the majority of which have dealt with US conditions. Golbeck et al (2010) focused on the US Congress, and analyzed the contents of over 6000 tweets from Members of Congress. The analysis showed that the Members tweeted primarily to disseminate information, often providing URLs to news articles about themselves or to their blog posts. These modes of usage seemingly correspond with the Sharing information and Reporting news categories reported by Java et al (2007). Congress people also reported on their daily activities, although these updates did not provide insights into the political process, nor did they improve transparency. Golbeck et al label these tweets “vehicles for self-promotion” (Golbeck, et al., 2010, p. 1620). While microblogging in general has evolved towards becoming “more conversational and collaborative” (Honeycutt & Herring, 2009, p. 10), Golbeck et al (2010) found such use to be limited among the politicians. Similarly, while the practices of retweeting and hashtagging appear to be widespread among general Twitter users, the researchers found only 5 retweets and 344 tweets with hashtags in their sample. These conservative patterns of use could be a result of forced or semi-adoption of the Twitter platform, an unwillingness to participate in the practice of twittering or perhaps simply a lack of knowledge regarding the different possibilities for use that are available (Golbeck, et al., 2010).
In order to catch the full spectrum of Twitter use during an intense period of political campaigning, this paper employs a broad approach, encompassing both non-parliamentary and parliamentary Twitter users. By studying these uses in a stable democracy, the paper provides the research community with important results regarding online political communication. Next, the method section explains the rationale for data collection and analysis.

3 Method

Data collection was performed by means of a “scrape” utilizing the TwapperKeeper application. At the time, TwapperKeeper was a free, publicly available online tool, allowing users to download and archive tweets according to a variety of specifications. Specifically, TwapperKeeper was used to produce a list featuring various information regarding the archived tweets: the message text, user name and id of the sender, user id of the recipient (if message is a reply), language code, client used to send tweet, geographical code, and the time the tweet was created. The data were then subject to analysis utilizing statistical software (SPSS) and the open source network graphing software Gephi (www.gephi.org). By means of these analyses, high-end users were identified. The Twitter pages of these users were visited in order to determine occupational status of the user, and to see whether or not the user appeared to be using the service under an assumed name (“screen name”) or not.

As noted by Golbeck et al (2010, p. 1618), the congressional calendar has an obvious impact on the activities of elected officials – and, should they be Twitter users, on the contents of their tweets. With the 2010 Swedish election day set to Sunday September 19th, data collection was employed in order to capture the Twitter activity concerning the election one month beforehand. Archiving via TwapperKeeper ensued on August 17th. In order to catch some of the post-election Twitter activity, data collection was only aborted four days after the election, September 22nd. In the weeks of political campaigning leading up to August 17th, the hashtag #val2010 (i.e. #election2010) emerged as the most commonly used hashtag to indicate content relevant to the upcoming event. Following Gaffney (2010), the tagging system employed by Twitter users allows the researcher to quickly identify transmissions of interest. As such, the delimitation of the study to focus on the #val2010 tag seemed to be a feasible approach to data collection.

4 Results

In order to provide an overview of the total sample used in the study at hand, figure 1 shows a timeline illustrating the distribution of tweets during the examined period of August 17th to September 22nd.
Figure 1. Longitudinal distribution of tweets.

The timeline is characterized by a number of “spikes”, indicating an increase in the frequency of tweets sent at those particular times. These spikes grow visibly larger as election day (September 19th) draws closer, with the largest increase of tweets appearing on election day itself. Perhaps not very surprising, the spikes visible in figure 1 can largely be explained by offline events influencing Twitter activity. Besides election day, which sees the largest spike featuring about 50% of the total number of archived tweets, significant spikes occur in conjunction with televised political debates, statements made by key politicians and offline political rallies. Table 1 shows the distribution of the total sample by type of messages (either singleton, @ or RT).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of tweet</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Singleton</td>
<td>60 088</td>
<td>60.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@</td>
<td>6 964</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RT</td>
<td>32 780</td>
<td>32.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>99 832</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Distribution of tweets by type.

Singletons are most common (N=60 088, 60.2%), followed by RT:s (N=32 780, 32.8%) and directed messages (@; N=6 964, 7%).

While figure 1 and table 1 provide an overview of the selected data, they do not give more specified information regarding Twitter use during the examined time period. With the distinction between singletons, mentions/replies and retweets in mind, the data were analyzed in order to find users who distinguished themselves according to this categorization of tweets. An examination of how Twitter contributes to a broadening of public debate, and to what extent it merely serves as yet another arena for already established societal actors requires a focus on high-end users. While this inevitably leaves
out the denizens of the #val2010 Twittersphere, it allows for careful scrutiny of who the most active users are, and how they approach the capabilities of microblogging services like Twitter. Table 2 shows the ten most active singleton tweeters.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Twitter ID</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Political affiliation</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>all_insane</td>
<td>1932</td>
<td>Anonymous, political-satirical content</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>blogfia</td>
<td>618</td>
<td>Political blogger</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AnnikaBeijbom</td>
<td>616</td>
<td>Fp (Liberals)</td>
<td>National Parliamentary candidate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nemokrati</td>
<td>550</td>
<td>Anonymous, author under assumed name</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pihlblad</td>
<td>544</td>
<td>Journalist</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>juditburda</td>
<td>392</td>
<td>M (Conservatives)</td>
<td>Local Parliamentary candidate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vpressfeldt</td>
<td>352</td>
<td>University student</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MuzafferUnsal</td>
<td>345</td>
<td>M (Conservatives)</td>
<td>Part-time politician</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mickep2</td>
<td>312</td>
<td>Journalist</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>skogskant</td>
<td>312</td>
<td>Anonymous</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Ten most active singleton tweeters.

Table 2 shows how the highest ranking user stands out with more than three times as many singletons (N=1932) sent than number two on the list (N=618). Table 2 identifies different kinds of users. Politicians from different camps and levels are represented: AnnikaBeijbom, the third most active user, is a candidate for the Liberal party (Folkpartiet). The remaining politicians on the list are both Conservatives (Moderaterna) below the top level of their party. A second group is political bloggers and journalists – all established voices in Swedish public debate. The remaining users on the top list are difficult to describe since they hide their identities and do not state any affiliation or political preference. Three users are anonymous, including the top-ranking all_insane. The latter’s name is a pun with a political edge aimed at the conservative coalition (collectively labelled Alliansen [the Alliance]). The two other anonymous users are Skogskant and Nemokrati, who claims to be an author Twittering under an assumed name.

In order to assess the conversational potential of Twitter, the reciprocity of mention/reply networks (i.e. tweets directed towards specific users by means of the @ character) were taken into account. Figure 2 provides a network analysis of the top @ networks.

Figure 2. Top @ networks. Graph constructed using the Force Atlas algorithm in Gephi. Degree Range set to 40 to visualize the different varieties of nodes.
The figure features a number of nodes, each representing a user. The colour of the nodes represents outdegree of each user. The outdegree is the number of nodes adjacent from a specific node. This is a measure of expansiveness. In a social network, the more initiatives, invitations, nominations etc. an actor carry out, the higher the outdegree (Wasserman and Faust 1994, 126). In the present study, the amount of reply messages sent to other users is the measure of expansiveness, so in figure 2, the darker the colour, the more @ messages the specific user sent, the higher the outdegree. Node size is dependent on indegree. Indegree measures popularity, such as the number of initiatives, invitations, nominations etc. an actor receives in a social network (Wasserman and Faust 1994, 126). In this case, the amount of @ messages sent to a user represents the indegree. In figure 2, then, the larger the node, the more messages were directed towards the specific user, and the higher the indegree. Straight lines between nodes specify unidirectional communication, while curved lines indicate reciprocity in exchanges of messages.

The graphical representation in figure 2 allows us to sort the identified core users into broad categories of senders (darker, smaller nodes), receivers (lighter, larger nodes) and sender-receivers (darker, larger nodes). The main users for each of the categories are provided in table 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>User category</th>
<th>Examples of identified users</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Senders</td>
<td>Feministerna (Politician, Feminist party), federley (Politician, Centre party)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>theamazinghanna (IT professional)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receivers</td>
<td>mrquispian, leerlandsson (Politicians, Pirate party), evalenajansson (Politician, Social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>democrats), FRA_PR (Anonymous, political-satirical content), parabrahamsson (IT professional), Gotthjarta (Anonymous)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sender-receivers</td>
<td>hanscjohansson, Beelzebjorn (Politicians, Pirate party), AnnikaBeijbom (Politician, Liberals), Jodsvall (Politician, Liberal democrats), Vysotskij (Left-wing political blogger), blogfia (Non-partisan political blogger), mickep2, Sdopping (journalists), Nemokrati (Anonymous)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Categorizations of top @ users.

Where senders are more active in communicating their views to other, specified users, they are not reciprocal in their use of the replies function – a tendency that is reversed for users categorized as receivers. These latter users tend to receive many messages, but are not as active in sending messages of their own. Finally, a more well-rounded Twitter user with regards to exchanging messages with others might be the sender-receiver. Users in this category tend to be more versatile in their use of the @ character, in that they demonstrate high levels of both sending and receiving messages.

Through retweets, a singleton can be redistributed in several steps, leading to a disseminating mode of communication. Studies have demonstrated that retweeting is effective also to distribute messages from users with few followers (Kwak et al 2010). As such, the retweet activity is crucial as a measure of who gets heard on Twitter. Figure 3 provides a network map of RT activity among the high end users in the data set.
Much like in figure 2, each node in figure 3 represents a user. The darker the colour of the node, the more active the user is at retweeting others’ tweets (i.e. the higher the outdegree). Users who are often retweeted are identified by larger node sizes (i.e. higher indegree). Line styles are interpreted in the same manner as in figure 2. Thus, three distinct user groups can be identified. Retweeters are represented by smaller, darker nodes, indicating high activity with regards to disseminating the messages of other users. Larger, lighter coloured nodes – indicating popularity in the network – represent elites as their messages tend to be frequently retweeted. Finally, users classified as networkers are distinguished by their tendency to retweet and to be retweeted. As such, their corresponding nodes tend to be larger and darker. Table 4 provides examples of the categorizations for each of the three identified user types.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>User category</th>
<th>Examples of identified users</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Retweeters</td>
<td>Annoula64, MrQuispiam (Politicians, Pirate party), dreadnallen (Politician, Feminist party), all_insane (Anonymous, political-satirical content), Nemokrati (Anonymous)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elites</td>
<td>piratpartiet (Official Twitter, Pirate party), miljopartiet (Official Twitter, Green party), nya_moderaterna (Official Twitter, Conservatives), rodgront2010 (Official Twitter, Red-green parties coalition), federley (Politician, Centre party), TobiasHoldstock (Press secretary for Conservatives), Pihlblad (Journalist) jocke (IT professional)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Networkers</td>
<td>AnnikaBeijbom (Politician, Liberals), beelzebjorn, falkvinge, annatroberg leorlandsson (Politicians, Pirate party), vpressfeldt (Student), SDDopping, emanuelkarlsen, danielswedin (Journalists), nikkelin (IT professional), UlfBjereld (Professor)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Categorizations of top RT users.

While the findings show clear examples of retweeters and elites, the majority of nodes in figure 3 can be characterized as relatively larger and darker – the characteristics of the more reciprocally oriented networker user type. Because of the relative frequency with which their tweets are retweeted by other users, and because they also tend to retweet messages originally posted by others, networkers not only enjoy significant standing in the network – they also contribute to the standings of others.

In sum, the results presented above indicate that core users of the #val2010 hashtag employed quite diverse uses and engaged in different network connections with each other. Moreover, it becomes apparent from the data presented here that many of the highly active users can be said to at least
potentially enjoy privileged positions in their respective professional capacities of journalists, politicians etc. Discrepancies like these will be discussed further in the final section of this paper.

5 Discussion

Quantitatively, Twitter clearly contributes to a broadening of public debate: It constitutes a novel arena for mediated public communication, and the sheer number of tweets – close to 100,000 in the present sample – on the Swedish 2010 election testifies to its use. The overall temporal distribution of activity found in the study does however signal a relationship between Twitter and mainstream media: spikes of activity in tweeting about the election can be linked to either events such as television talk shows, or the media coverage of offline events such as political rallies. Indeed, Bruns (2010) reported a similar timeline in his study on Twitter use during the 2010 Australian election. As such, Twitter activity appears to be largely dependent on offline events – a trend that manifests itself in both Swedish and Australian political contexts, as well as in previous research on similar matters.

The identified relationship indicates that Twitter, in the present case, falls somewhat short of the expectations held by those most optimistic on behalf of the democratic and disruptive potential of new web tools. Still, by offering an arena for discussion about central events in the campaign, Twitter does serve a function not to be disregarded. This function does, however, seem to be first and foremost one of disseminating and not of dialogue: merely 7% of the messages in the sample were replies. This distribution largely follows the findings of previous research (e.g. Honeycutt & Herring, 2009; Kwak, et al., 2010), and indicates that Twitter is used mainly for sending undirected messages, with its potential for conversation and dissemination employed at a much smaller rate.

The important question, though, is to what extent it merely serves as another arena for already established societal actors, or rather facilitates a new distribution among public speakers, allowing new voices or perspectives to be heard. The first important observation from the list of high end users concerns the relationship between their volume of activity: While a lot of users contributed a few tweets about the election, merely a few users contributed a lot. In a sense, the high end users do only represent the tip of the iceberg, but in terms of volume, they constitute a substantial part of the activity.

Second, the findings of this study indicates that Twitter indeed serves as just a new outlet for speakers already belonging to an elite, or at least affiliated with prominent positions in mainstream media or political debate in general. The majority of high end users are politicians or established journalists and bloggers. This main impression should not, however, lead us to ignore the presence of other actors in the part of the Twittersphere studied here. The most conspicuous group consists of anonymous users. While not ruling out the possibility that these accounts – like all_insane, Nemokrati and skogskant – may represent established actors, it does signal the potential for outsiders and less conventional voices to speak up via Twitter. Of course, the very fact that one can build a profile and make an impact in public political discussion under pseudonyms is a rather novel and interesting finding in the present case – that seems to set online media apart from traditional mass media channels. The ways in which anonymous users interact with and relate to other users, and to what extent their communication gets into wider distribution is a clear topic for further scrutiny.

Third, the potential for Twitter as a means for conversation and retweeting was assessed in order to see how these modes of use played out among the top users identified. For @ network, the category of sender-receiver is arguably the largest one – indicating that many of the top users took a reciprocal approach to Twitter as conversational tool. For the RT network, the category of networker appeared to be most common, indicating an equal stance towards retweeting and being retweeted among the top users. Interestingly, while the category of elites is dominated by the official Twitter accounts of a variety of major Swedish political actors, other, minor political actors (like non-parliamentary parties [Pirate party, Feminist party], political bloggers et.c.) appear more active in both networks. These findings indicate the potential of the Twitter platform as a means of outreach for such minor, partly
marginalized actors. In sum, while major political parties and actors appear to have a hard time adapting to the reciprocal nature of @ and RT practices using Twitter, these means of conversation and networking appear to play some part in the use of minor actors as identified in this study.

While this study has provided important results regarding political Twitter use, the selected approach has limitations which should be acknowledged. A first set of limitations has to do with hashtags. As studies have showed, in Twitter communication, hashtags are dynamic entities, and often contested (Hickman, 2010). Hashtag identification can be difficult - especially pertaining to a specific topic and as the discussion unfolds. Although “val2010” remained stable and dominant throughout the period of study in the present case, the data did not cover all relevant tweets. Some messages used other hashtags, misspelled them, or left them out altogether. Even those who used the val2010 tag when composing a singleton, say, criticizing a political candidate on a televised debate, might not employ the tag for a subsequent reply message that results from the original singleton. However, even though the use of a specific hashtag will entail biases, the resulting data set does, compared to other instances of off- and online mediated communication, give a unique basis for a comprehensive analysis.

A second limitation has to do with context. While an analysis of Twitter use can yield detailed insights into the practices of public communication on one specific online arena, the ramifications of the findings, should in the next step, be made subject to comparisons. This could entail comparison with microblogging use in other social settings, or comparison with other forms of online communication – say blogging, or discussion forum use – in the same setting. Such comparisons would enable a better understanding of the weight and impact of such patterns of use as identified in this study.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Twitter remains a marginal activity. While 19% of US adult Internet users also use Twitter (Fox et. al), the numbers are substantially lower in other societies. A German survey found 3% of adults to be Twitter users (Busemann & Gscheidle, 2010), and Norwegian statistics show 6% (Arnesen & Solheim, 2010). In Sweden, 8% of Internet users are Twitter users – arguably a minority in the population (Najafian, 2010). As such, what we are studying are advanced internet users and their patterns of dissemination and interaction. Nonetheless, by studying elite users like these, we might be able to get a glimpse of how use of microblogs and similar services will be shaped in the future – and of how marginalized political voices can make themselves heard on a wider scale.

References


