

**Death of a platform?
A longitudinal and comparative study of political party Twitter
use in Scandinavia**

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While a series of case studies have provided useful insights into the political uses of Twitter, scholars have pointed to the necessity for longitudinal and cross-country findings to further understanding of social media use in this regard. This study presents a comparative analysis of Scandinavian political party communication on Twitter. Adopting a longitudinal approach, the study details the full histories (up until the end of 2020) of party Twitter accounts from Denmark, Norway, and Sweden to provide overarching, structural insights into how the studied political parties have made use of Twitter. Additionally, the study examines how potential voters have chosen to engage with the tweets posted by the parties. While Twitter once was described as integral for political campaigning and indeed for the hybrid media systems in these countries, the results indicate an overall declining trend when it comes to uses of the platform that are often considered as more demanding (such as replies), while less demanding uses (such as likes) appear to increase over time. Implications and opportunities for further research are discussed.

Keywords: Twitter, Scandinavia, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Political Communication

Introduction

Building on work looking into the adoption and use of web pages by political actors (e.g., Gibson, 2004; Foot and Schneider, 2006), scholars have expanded their horizons to also study party and citizen activity on various social media platforms (e.g., Bruns & Burgess, 2011; Koc-Michalska et al., 2020). Certainly, claims of the importance of social media use for political campaigning purposes have echoed among researchers and practitioners for over a decade (Pineda et al., 2020; Tumasjan et al., 2010) making it difficult to argue against the suggestion by Dimitrova and Matthes (2018) that “the impact of social media in political campaigning around the world is undeniable” (2018: 333). However, not only have such platforms come and gone during the last 10-15 years (e.g., Ancu and Cozma, 2009), the services that have stood the test of time have changed and adapted to fit with shifting online tendencies, trends, and business prioritizations (e.g., Rieder et al., 2015; Blumler, 2015). Much like the services themselves have changed over time, similar tendencies can be discerned regarding the use of the services where we would be wise to expect “significant differences in human communicative practices” (Kreiss et al., 2017: 21) not only between different social media platforms, but also over time on each service respectively. Beyond a more general need for research on social media use to take longitudinal approaches (e.g., Matassi and Boczkowski, 2021; Bene, 2021b; Esser and Pfetsch, 2020), scholars have pointed to the need to “move beyond the one-off nature of most Twitter-based research” (van Vliet et al., 2020: 1), tracing historical developments and thereby furthering our understanding of communication technology use for campaigning purposes.

Related to the need to provide longitudinal insights into the political uses of social media such as Twitter is the apparent demand for comparative insights between different political contexts (e.g., Mosca and Quaranta, 2021; Liu et al., 2020; Bene, 2021b; Bene, 2021a; Koc-Michalska et al., 2020; Bossetta, 2018). Indeed, Esser and Vliegenhart (2018) suggest that “only in the past decade have communication scientists slowly begun to integrate comparative elements into their research” (2018: 26). Similarly, Esser and Pfetsch

(2020) note that “the comparative study of political communication [...] is a relatively young research field” (2020: 340), clearly underlining the need for systematic cross-country comparative efforts.

Based on the above suggestions, the study at hand draws inspiration from the most similar cases design principles (Przeworski and Teune, 1982) and presents a structural analysis of how major political parties in the three Scandinavian countries – Denmark, Norway and Sweden – have used their Twitter accounts from their respective inceptions up until the end of the year 2020. The Scandinavian countries constitute rather specific cases in terms of social media and political communication – for instance, news consumption from traditional media outlets is comparably high, and social media play somewhat smaller roles in the political information diets of voters compared with other countries (Newman et al., 2023). Thus, what we are studying here could be considered as outlier cases – cases that are likely to provide results useful for further, similar comparisons with other countries. With this in mind, the research question for the study presented here reads as follows: What characterizes the over-time structural development of political party Twitter use in the three Scandinavian countries? Drawing on the findings and suggestions of previous scholarship, the analyses presented in the paper are organized based on the supply and demand of political social media use (e.g., Nielsen and Vaccari, 2013; Yang and Kim, 2017; Larsson, 2020).

The supply and demand of party Twitter use

Research on digital media use during political campaigns has mainly developed along two distinctive tracks, focusing on the “supply-side” or the “demand-side” of usage. Studies focused on the supply-side of political communication have typically focused on how political actors like parties and party leaders make use of online media, asking questions like “who is adopting [...] new digital tools and how are they being used?” (Gibson, 2012: 77). Demand-side studies, then, have characteristically dealt with the ways in which citizens have interacted with the content supplied by the aforementioned political

actors (e.g., Xenos et al., 2015; Nielsen and Vaccari, 2013). Drawing mainly from a supply-side approach, the study design will nevertheless also provide insights into the demand related to Scandinavian political party Twitter use.

Supply – Structure of party use

Launched in 2006, Twitter first rose to prominence as a tool for political communication in 2008 as featured by the Obama campaign for the United States presidency. Marwick and boyd (2011a) point out that at this time, Twitter “accounts and media attention” in the US “exponentially increased” (2011a: 142), leading to increased use in other parts of the world – including in Scandinavia. Burgess and Bruns (2012) suggested that this spread of the platform under scrutiny led to “breathless anticipation” (2012: 387) of so-called *Twitter elections* – political campaigns that would supposedly be characterized by the adoption and zealous use of Twitter by politicians and citizens alike.

While several issues can be identified that stand in the way of Twitter adoption and continued use (e.g. Miller, 2013; Karlsen, 2013), the parties in the countries studied here did indeed make efforts to integrate this new technology into their campaign rationales. In Denmark, a survey of politicians in the 2011 elections found that 16% of respondents had a Twitter account (Skovsgaard and Van Dalen, 2013) – a statistic that had risen to 68% according to a similar study performed in relation to the 2015 Danish elections (Jensen et al., 2016). In Norway, interviews performed with top political candidates after the 2009 parliamentary election reported that the interviewees started to use Twitter for “continuous dialogue” (Enli and Skogerbø, 2013: 770) – a finding that could be seen as in line with results suggesting the somewhat surprisingly large amount of discussion initiated by Norwegian party leaders on the platform at hand during the 2013 elections (Larsson and Ihlen, 2015). Reporting on data collected in May 2013, Larsson and Kalsnes (2014) found that while 57% of Norwegian parliamentarians had adopted Twitter, that same statistic for Facebook Pages reached only 24%. Thus, at least for that particular time period, Twitter appears to have been viewed as more important than Facebook. Beyond Norway, that same study also reported on Sweden, finding that at the time of data collection, 58% of the

members of the Swedish *Riksdag* had a Twitter account, while a mere 19% operated a Facebook Page. For both these latter two countries, the degree of activity was found to be higher on Twitter than on Facebook – a finding that further strengthens the role of Twitter during this time.

Thus, while Twitter has enjoyed considerable popularity among Scandinavian parties and politicians, we must remember that “social media election campaigns are constantly developing” (Enli, 2017: 59), adopting or rejecting certain platforms and certain uses of platforms. Indeed, taking into account the influx of other social media in Scandinavian politicking during recent years (e.g. Grusell and Nord, 2020; Ekman and Widholm, 2017), the upcoming results section will detail the year-by-year use of Twitter per country in a series of different ways.

Supply – Sources of tweets

As the number of social media services multiply, so do the tasks of communication professionals. Needing to monitor a seemingly constantly growing and diversifying set of platforms, often handling multiple accounts on each platform, dashboard applications like TweetDeck, Meltwater and Hootsuite can help campaign staffers navigate several services from the same application (e.g. Bossetta, 2018; Vergeer, 2012). While tools like these could be considered as indicative of the professionalization (Lisi, 2013) of political campaigning, their design and functionalities will allow for or perhaps encourage some practices, while making other modes of use less visible or accessible (Kreiss et al., 2017; Kreiss and McGregor, 2017). Specifically for the platform under scrutiny here, the different software and similar applications that together make up “Twitter’s Client Ecosystem” (Gerlitz and Rieder, 2018: 531) all have predefined options for use. For example, predefined varieties of Twitter use (such as replies, retweets or hashtags) can be more or less featured in such applications, making certain uses more accessible than others (Gerlitz and Rieder, 2018). While political campaigns have been shown to prefer “mundane” (Nielsen, 2010; Baldwin-Philippi, 2017) or perhaps established tools for and approaches to

communication over more advanced varieties such as the dashboard applications discussed here, reverse tendencies towards more advanced online engagement can also be discerned (Tenscher et al., 2015; Larsson and Ihlen, 2015). Remembering that “technology generally becomes easier to use with time” (Druckman et al., 2007: 429), the upcoming results will look into the ways that parties have accessed Twitter during the studied time period.

Supply – Types of tweets

Users can employ Twitter in a series of different and seemingly ever-changing ways. This study differentiates between four types of tweets that were sent by the studied political actors – *original tweets*, *@mentions*, *@replies* and *retweets*.

First, *original tweets* (terminology suggested by e.g. Bruns, 2011; Bruns and Moon, 2018) are perhaps primarily defined by their lack of what can be referred to as interactivity markers (featuring various uses of the @ character as discussed below) – a characteristic that makes original tweets quite unlike the other types in the typology. Sometimes also referred to as undirected tweets (Svensson and Larsson, 2016), original tweets can be thought of as tweets posted to the platform with no specific recipient in mind – except for the followers of the posting account. The two subsequent categories, *@mentions* and *@replies*, are similar to each other in that they both make use of the @ character in combination with a Twitter username to signal a willingness to interact on behalf of the poster. Indeed, varieties of tweets including the @ character have been referred to as constituting the “primary interactive affordance” (Hemsley et al., 2018: 1) of Twitter, or as a “basic indicator of social media interaction” (Pineda et al., 2020: 10).

Using the now-defunct Twitter API (Application Programming Interface) v2 for data collection, the metadata provided with the downloads allows for separation of *@replies* - a message sent in reply to some other, previous tweet - from other types of tweets. Working from this initial classification, tweets not classified by the API as *@replies*, but that include one or more @ characters in relation to one or more usernames

are considered in the following as @mentions. Consequently, while @replies are often part of conversations, @mentions are often used to mention or “tag” other users - which in turn can lead to discussions via @replies. Regardless of which of these types of tweets the parties have chosen to make use of during the studied period, the presence or indeed absence of either variety could be considered as indicative of the degree to which interaction with other users was a priority – or not.

Finally, for *retweets*, the functionality to redistribute tweets originally sent by others can be likened to the share option offered by Facebook (Larsson, 2015). For the user being retweeted, such attention can indeed be quite important as redistribution assists in reaching virality (Klinger and Svensson, 2018; Nahon and Hemsley, 2013). For the user who sends the retweet, the act of redistributing content originally penned by some other user can be construed as a sort of linkage between one’s own profile and that of the retweeted user (Venturini et al., 2018), expressing some sort of connection to other Twitter users in the public Twitter feed. In conclusion, while previous findings have suggested that retweet use by political actors has increased over time (Bruns and Moon, 2018; Bruns et al., 2016), the overall decreasing in Twitter use in our studied countries (e.g. Ipsos/MMI, 2018), might yield differing results in the contexts studied here.

Supply – Tweet features

Beyond the possibility to send different types of tweets as discussed above, users can adorn their messages with a series of other functionalities. Inspired by previous scholarship (McQuail and Deuze, 2021: 323-325), we can think of such functionalities as *centripetal* (inward-facing, encouraging continued or deepened use of Twitter) or *centrifugal* (supposedly encouraging outward-facing activities, likely contributing to users leaving the platform). Focus is placed here on *hashtags* as an example of a centripetal feature, while the possibility to include *URLs* serves as an example of a centrifugal feature.

While hashtags and hashtag use (or indeed the uses of @mentions, @replies and retweets) can take on different meanings for different Twitter users (Driscoll and Walker,

2014), they can broadly be described as thematic keywords that allow the sender of a tweet to tag his or her message using the *#keyword* approach to make it visible to other users searching for tweets carrying that same hashtag (van Vliet et al., 2020). Bruns and Stieglitz (2012) point out that by embellishing their tweets with hashtags, users can take part in what Fiske (1992) referred to as “audiencing” – commenting on and discussing hashtagged events with fellow spectators in a largely “ambient and ephemeral” (Bruns and Burgess, 2011: 40) setting. For the political parties studied here - much like for any other Twitter user - using hashtags could be considered a useful tactic to gain attention among such “audiencing” users of the platform (e.g. Pineda et al., 2020). Indeed, while it has been suggested that the use of hashtags might exclude more casual Twitter users (e.g. Jungherr, 2015), findings presented by Kreiss and co-authors (2017) suggested the need for political actors to produce content that was “native” to the platforms used in order to gain traction. While we might expect political hashtags to enjoy longevity (as suggested by Bastos et al., 2013), it is also possible that the aforementioned decline of Twitter use could be mirrored in the longitudinal use of an inward-facing, centripetal feature such as the one discussed here. The results presented here should shed light on these developments.

As for the outward-facing feature under scrutiny – the inclusion of URLs - studies focusing on the web pages of political campaigns have suggested that providing links to other online sources can serve to provide context for political campaigns, placing them in a larger frame of understanding for potential voters (Foot and Schneider, 2006: 103-106). However, link provision on a campaign web site might not always be feasible for the purposes of gaining traction, as it potentially suggests for the user to leave the site and visit the link destination instead. Not only does such activity possibly reduce the amount of activity on the linked-from web site – the information provided on the linked-to site is likely to be beyond the editorial control of the campaign itself (Druckman et al., 2007: 434; Foot and Schneider, 2006: 125). While such loss of control in relation to the campaign web site has been consistently shown as problematic for political campaigns (e.g. Stromer-Galley, 2000; Stromer-Galley, 2014), encouraging users to leave Twitter to visit a URL potentially controlled by the campaign itself instead could serve as beneficial for

campaigning purposes – especially considering the aforementioned overall decline in Twitter use. Indeed, previous research has suggested an increase of URLs over time (Bruns et al., 2016), and Jungherr’s (2015) research review of Twitter use in election campaigns concluded that parties and politicians “tended to use Twitter predominantly to post information on their campaign activities, and links to their own Web sites” (Jungherr, 2015: 76). Thus, Twitter appears to be a central part of the online media ecology (Scolari, 2012) or indeed of the hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2017; Jacobs et al., 2020). Nevertheless, research suggests that Twitters function in relation to URLs is largely centrifugal, encouraging users to leave Twitter by following links to sources likely controlled or at least vouched for by the campaigns themselves.

Demand – Tweet engagement

Social media platforms such as Twitter change over time, modifying how their users can provide content and indeed how they can engage with content already posted to the platform (Matassi and Boczkowski, 2021; Helmond et al., 2019). Specifically for Twitter, the possibilities for users to like, reply to and retweet tweets have been fairly constant since the inception of the platform. While other such possibilities – such as the ability to quote tweets - were added to the platform during the time of this study (Rao, 2020), exploratory engagement with the data on which the study is based showed that quote tweets were used to a minimal extent by the accounts under scrutiny and similarly by those engaging with content provided by those accounts. Thus, focus here will be placed on the previously mentioned engagement varieties of likes, @replies, and retweets.

The possibility to like a tweet has been compared to similar functionalities on other social media in that they can be considered as what Hayes and co-authors refer to as “lightweight signals” (Hayes et al., 2016: 171) or indeed a “minimalist communicative practice” similar to everyday small talk or phatic communication (Coupland et al., 1992: 210). While the argument could be made that the precise meaning of a like essentially varies for each individual (e.g. Gorrell and Bontcheva, 2015; Lomborg and Bechmann,

2014), likes on Twitter and on other social media services are commonly described as a “less involved” (Muñoz and Towner, 2017: 298). Taken together, the supposed ease with which likes are used on the platform at hand suggests rather frequent use – especially, as we shall see, when compared with the other two modes of engagement studied here.

Specifically, for @replies and retweets, previous scholarship suggests a contrary development than predicted for likes. As previously discussed, the use of the @ character in relation to a specified username has been described “as a basic indicator of social media interaction” (Pineda et al., 2020: 10) and in a more general sense, as a sign of a willingness to interact or to enter into dialogue with other users (e.g. Graham et al., 2013; Bruns and Stieglitz, 2012). Marwick and boyd (2011b) reminds us that while Twitter users have the opportunity to send Direct Messages which are seen by the recipient only, the “dominant communication practices” of the platform under scrutiny “are public” (Marwick and boyd, 2011b: 118).

Compared to liking tweets, not only does the sender of a reply need to formulate a message (which has been shown to be taxing for an increasing amount of social media users, see e.g. Muñoz and Towner, 2017; Koc-Michalska et al., 2020), the sender also needs to handle the publicness of said message. As previous scholarship has suggested that such publicity is not always coveted (e.g. Bene, 2017; Costera Meijer and Groot Kormelink, 2015; Vraga et al., 2015), such preferences might yield likes a more common way of interacting with tweets when compared to the other two varieties studied here.

Finally, retweets - the redistribution of a tweet originally sent by another user (Larsson, 2015) - are public, much like @replies. This quality could make them hard for users to fully embrace as previously discussed. However, given that retweets essentially do not require more than the touch of a button to execute, they have been described as “a more passive and less demanding form” of engagement (Enli, 2017: 54). In conclusion, much like for the other varieties of tweet engagement discussed above, the study at hand will detail shed light on the over-time development of retweets posted in relation to political party tweets.

Method

Norris (2009) has correctly pointed to many of the difficulties facing those interested in undertaking comparative political communication studies – including the lack of “common concepts, standardized instruments, and shared archival datasets” (Norris, 2009: 323). Nevertheless, a little over a decade later, Esser and Pfetsch (2020) suggested that as a result of considerable progress in comparative approaches – such as technological advances and the increased use of computational methods (Theocharis and Jungherr, 2020) - the symbolic glass representing comparative studies can now be seen as “half full rather than half empty” (2020: 341; see also Esser and Vliegenthart, 2018). This study made use of such standardized instruments for data collection as made available by the Twitter API v2 accessed through the Academic Research product track (Twitter, 2021). Specifically, focus was placed on all parties from each country that enjoyed parliamentary representation at the end of the year 2020. Table 1 features the parties included in the study, as well as some metadata describing the sample.

Table 1. Danish, Norwegian and Swedish parties included in the study.

Country	Party	Abbreviation	First tweet	Last tweet	N of tweets
DK	The Alternative	A	2013-11-27	2020-12-30	28735
	Social Liberal Party	RV	2008-04-22	2020-12-31	18829
	Socialist People's Party	SF	2009-04-01	2020-12-28	10150
	Red-Green Alliance	E	2010-02-06	2020-12-31	8417
	Liberal Alliance	LA	2011-03-10	2020-12-31	7302
	Conservatives	K	2007-08-21	2020-12-29	7160
	Liberals	V	2010-06-03	2020-12-29	5262
	Danish People's Party	DF	2013-02-28	2020-12-31	5167
	Social Democrats	S	2011-02-12	2020-12-21	2365
	The New Right	NB	2015-10-20	2020-03-09	54
NO	Greens	MDG	2008-11-26	2020-12-23	23697
	Liberals	V	2009-01-28	2020-12-31	17590
	Socialist Left	SV	2009-01-07	2020-12-28	16774
	Social Democrats	Ap	2008-10-02	2020-12-11	7401
	Conservatives	H	2009-10-01	2020-08-25	7295
	Centre	Sp	2009-07-10	2019-11-08	5033
	Red Party	R	2009-01-04	2020-12-25	3370
	Christian Democrats	KrF	2009-04-27	2020-12-04	2366
	Progress Party	FrP	2010-10-01	2018-04-29	1744
SE	Liberals	L	2009-01-13	2020-12-31	25388
	Social Democrats	S	2008-12-15	2020-12-29	23191
	Conservatives	M	2009-01-21	2020-12-24	17326
	Centre	C	2008-11-17	2020-12-29	17233
	Christian Democrats	Kd	2009-01-15	2020-12-31	16550
	Left Party	V	2008-11-13	2020-12-31	15772
	Greens	Mp	2008-12-14	2020-12-29	14120
	Sweden Democrats	Sd	2009-12-19	2020-12-31	12750

Note. Presented in descending order of N of tweets.

While most of the Norwegian and Swedish parties joined Twitter in 2008 or 2009, as details in Table 1 suggest, the majority of Danish parties did so a few years later. Of note is also the fact that Twitter does not appear to have been a priority of the major right-

wing populist parties in each country – the Danish People’s Party, the Norwegian Progress Party and the Sweden Democrats. Indeed, the low numbers in the rightmost column associated with these parties are indicative of the tendency for these parties to view Twitter as a platform primarily associated with societal elites (e.g. Larsson and Kalsnes, 2014; Larsson, 2017; Kalsnes, 2016).

While research into Twitter has been troubled by the ever-changing ways in which data collection could be performed (e.g. Bruns, 2019), the use of the now-defunct Twitter API v2 allowed for the systematic collection of tweets and their associated metadata from the full Twitter database – not including, of course, tweets that had been deleted at the time of data collection (e.g. Walker et al., 2019). Specifically, the party Twitter account names were gathered from the official party web sites. This information was then used to fetch the full histories of each account leading up to and including December 31, 2020. The *academictwitteR* package for the R programming language (Barrie and Ho, 2021) was used to collect the full histories of the Twitter accounts operated by the parties that enjoyed parliamentary representation at the end of 2020.

In total, the data collection process yielded 321 041 tweets from the party accounts. While the inclusion criteria employed here might have led to parties previously in parliament being excluded from the study, the major political actors for each country were nevertheless included.

Results

There are considerable differences between the three Scandinavian countries in terms of population size. In late October of 2021, Denmark had roughly 5,8 million inhabitants, Norway had about 5,4 million, and Sweden boasted 10,3 million residents. Thus, while these size differences influence the results presented here, the interest here is in assessing the overall patterns that emerge from the data – and to what extent similarities can be observed in patterns appearing across the three countries.

First, a look at the overall Twitter use undertaken by the parties in each country is presented. Figure 1 features line graphs detailing the year-by-year developments in each country.

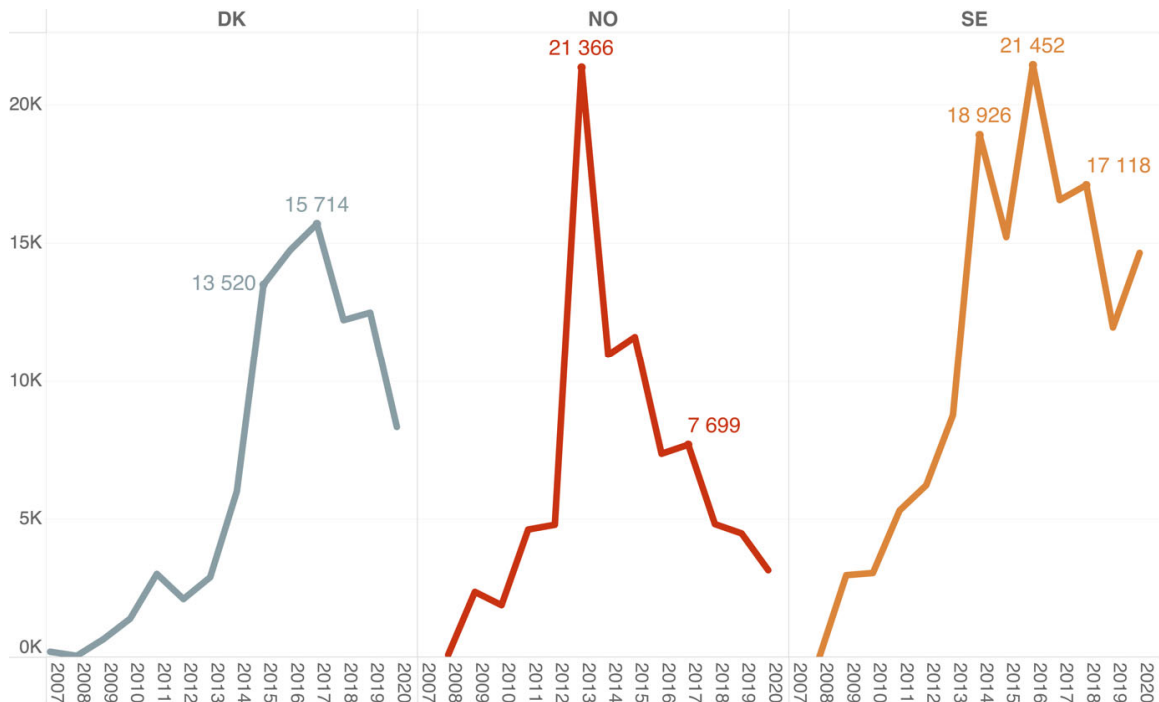


Figure 1. Twitter use by parties per country and year.

The timeline for each country shows tendencies of *Twitter elections* as discussed previously. Indeed, 2015 saw a national election in Denmark yielding a visible spike of 13 520 tweets throughout that year, topped by the 2017 local elections in the same country, which resulted in the highest yearly sum for Denmark – 15 714 tweets. For Norway, the 2013 national election year produced the highest yield (21 366 tweets). The rather drastic drop to 7 699 tweets for the 2017 election year is perhaps the clearest example of a trend also seen elsewhere in Figure 1 - with the possible exception of the Swedish case. Curiously, Sweden sees the clearest upsurge during a non-election year (2016 with 21 452 tweets provided by the studied political parties), while the 2014 (18 926 tweets) and 2018 (17 118 tweets) also see spikes. Finally, while the downward trend seems steadfast for

Denmark and Norway, the Swedish case again shows somewhat differing tendencies. The upward tendency for the line representing the activity of Swedish parties towards the end of the line could perhaps be indicative of the EU elections that took place during the last year of this study.

Next, Figure 2 details the over-time development of the use of sophisticated dashboard-type software packages at the hands of the studied parties. As analyses of these uses broken down per country (not included here) showed similar tendencies, Figure 2 presents a combined view of such software use for all three countries.

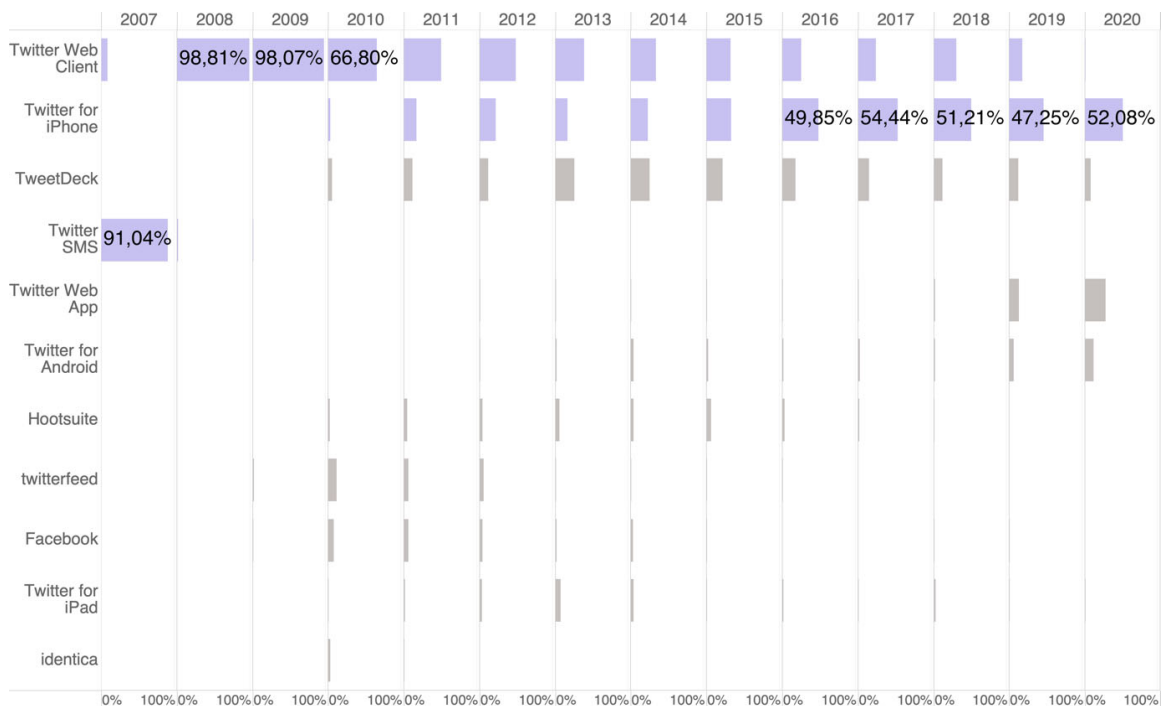


Figure 2. Most popular tweet sources per year.

Note. Sources accounting for more than 1% of the total amount of tweets per year shown.

Narrowing down the scope to those applications that were used for at least 1 % of tweets per year, a few tendencies can be seen in Figure 2. For instance, while uses of what could be considered as more sophisticated or professionalized (e.g. Strömbäck, 2007) software are visible in the figure (i.e., TweetDeck and Hoosuite), the bulk of use emanates

from what could perhaps best be described as more rudimentary sources or tools (i.e., YY). Consider the bars that have been marked in light blue for purposes of presentation. Some of these bars include percentages to illustrate the proverbial rise and fall of various forms of Twitter software – for instance, whereas use of the Twitter Web Client (which indicates tweets sent from a computer web browser) has diminished over time, the use of the Twitter for iPhone application increased. Indeed, while posting tweets via SMS signaled an early interest in mobile uses, such mobile modes of employment grow frequent only in the latter part of the studied time period. Thus, the results presented in Figure 2 indicate that only a comparably small amount of what was previously described as sophisticated approaches to Twitter use were employed by the parties.

Next, Figures 3a (for Denmark), 3b (for Norway) and 3c (for Sweden) detail the year-by-year percentages of types of tweets sent by parties in each country.

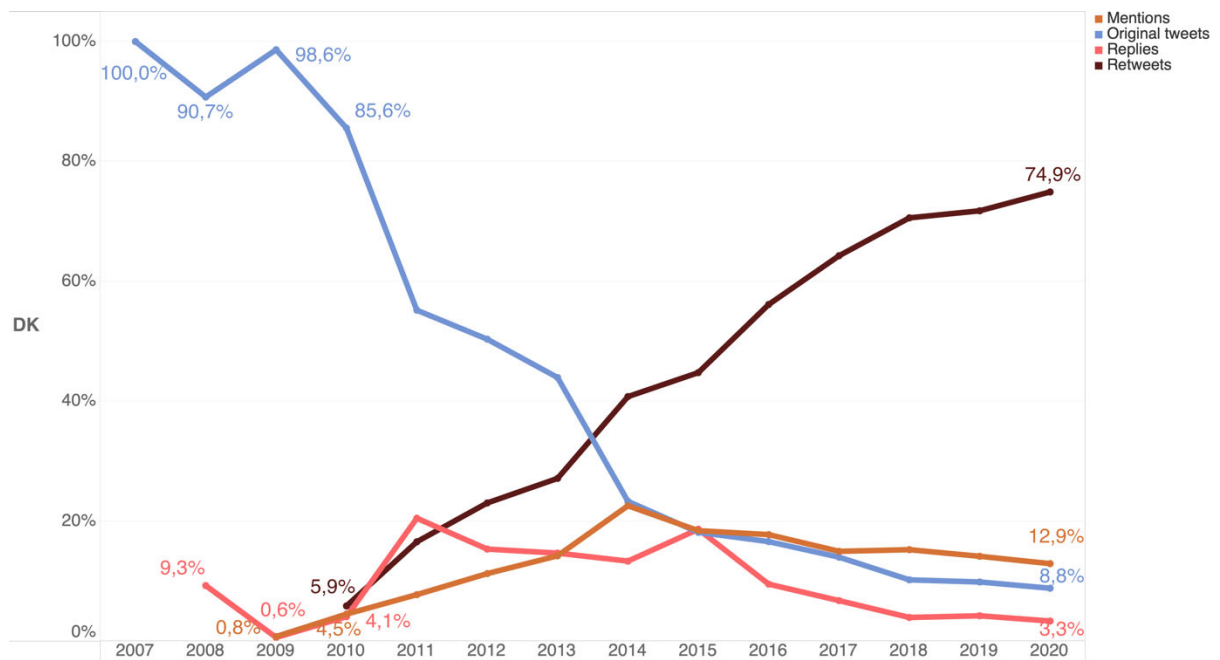


Figure 3a. Types of tweets sent per year by Danish political parties.

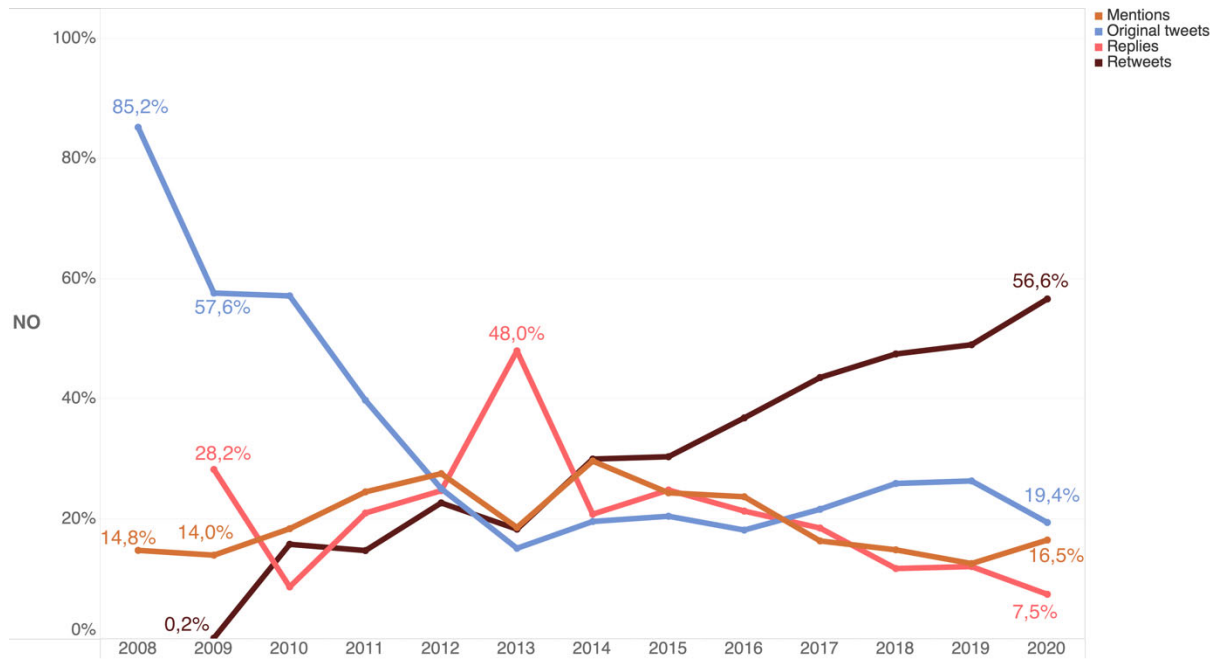


Figure 3b. Types of tweets sent per year by Norwegian political parties.

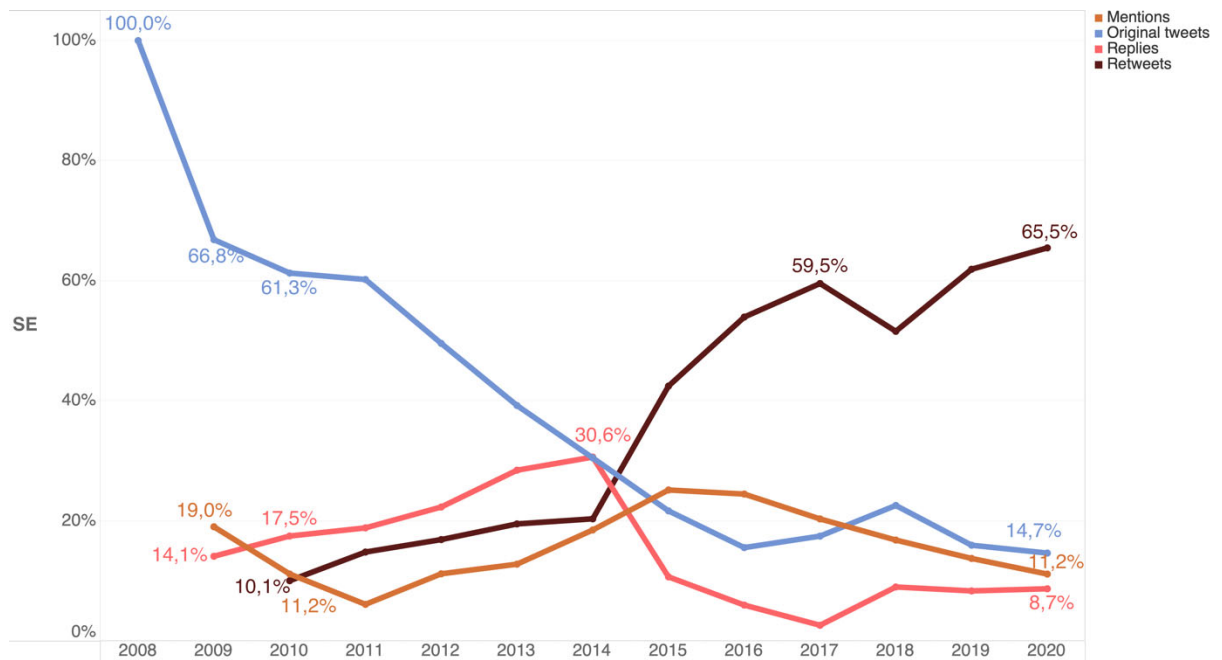


Figure 3c. Types of tweets sent per year by Swedish political parties.

Accounting for differences relating to election years in the three countries as mentioned above, similar trends relating to the types of tweets sent can nevertheless be discerned for Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. Following the same logic as in Figure 2, the lines depicting the types of tweets sent have been provided with percentages at the beginning and end of the studied time period in order to highlight these over-time changes in Twitter prioritization. Specifically, the results presented in Figures 3a-3c indicate that while original tweets and @replies were common when parties first started their accounts, an apparent shift of usage preferences can be distinguished about halfway through the studied time period. Specifically, around 2013 and 2014 the bulk of use shifted towards retweets. A clear rising trend for this type of tweet can be seen in all three countries, culminating in 2020 with Danish parties sending 6 065 retweets (accounting for close to 75 % of their total activity on their platform that year), Norwegian parties sending 1 724 such redistributed messages (accounting for 56,6 %) and Swedish parties sending 9 436 retweets (65,5 %). Thus, while other uses still appear to be prevalent, the end of the studied time period sees a clear shift from the initial phase – percentagewise, political actors appear to have chiefly turned to focus on the redistribution of content provided by others.

Further for the supply side of party Twitter use, Figure 4 details the uses of what was previously described as inward-facing features – exemplified here with hashtags – and outward-facing features – exemplified here with URLs. Indeed, with hashtags serving to further engage the user on the platform at hand, URLs are by design and functionality intended to lead the user elsewhere.

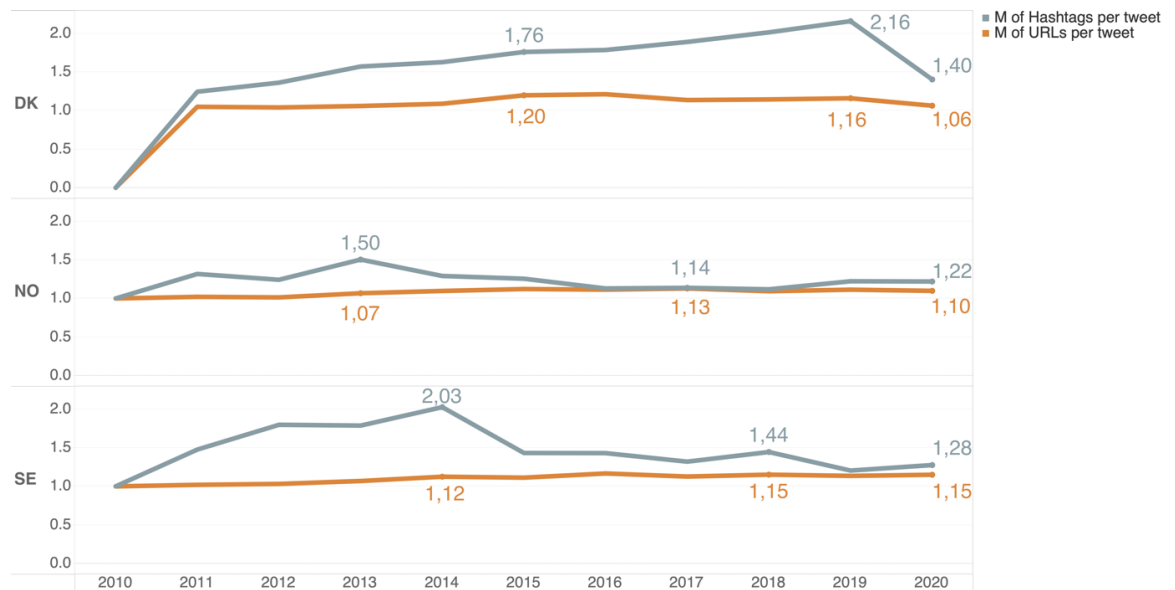


Figure 4. Mean of tweet features per post – hashtags and URLs – per year and country.

Further for the supply side of party Twitter use, Figure 4 details the uses of what was previously described as inward-facing features – exemplified here with hashtags – and outward-facing features – exemplified here with URLs. Indeed, with hashtags serving to further engage the user on the platform at hand, URLs are by design and functionality intended to lead the user elsewhere. The figure shows the means of hashtags and URLs per post for the final year in the data set as well as for key upsurges and national election years for each country. While the lines in Figure 4 do indeed indicate the prevalence of hashtags over URLs in all three studied countries, the distance between these lines seems to decrease over the course of the studied years. In order to illustrate this, a series of independent sample t-tests were conducted, comparing the means of hashtags and URLs. Indeed, comparably early means, such as the ones shown in relation to the 2015 Danish, the 2013 Norwegian and the 2014 Swedish election years, were all significantly different from each other within each country/year pairing ($p < .001$ for all comparisons). There is also a significant difference during the 2019 Danish elections. For most of the remaining comparisons – the 2017 Norwegian election year, the 2018 Swedish election year as well

as the comparison for the years 2020 in Norway and Sweden - all failed to reach statistical significance ($p > .05$ for all comparisons). For this last year, the Danish case again showed somewhat differing tendencies – here, the mean of hashtags per tweet ($M = 1.40$, $Sd = 0.62$) was significantly different from the mean of URLs per tweet ($M = 1.06$, $Sd = 0.33$).

While the design of the study at hand does not allow for any firm suggestions as to why Danish parties behave differently from their other Scandinavian neighbours with regards to tweet features, it does not seem entirely unlikely that these differing use patterns could be related to Danish parties being comparably late adapters of the platform at hand - as shown in Table 1. Indeed, later adoption of platforms such as Twitter is likely to lead to different use patterns (Strandberg, 2013; Criado et al., 2013), a suggestion from previous scholarship that appears to be reflected in Figure 4.

Finally, for the demand side of the Twitter activity studied here, Figure 5 details the means of likes, @replies and retweets per country and year.

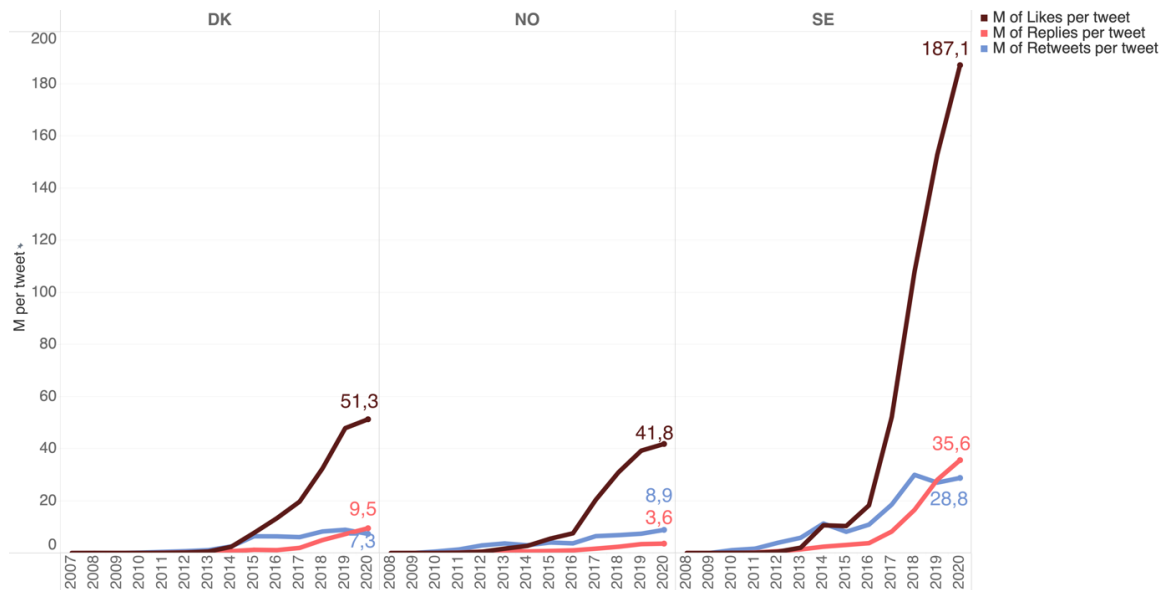


Figure 5. Mean of Twitter engagement per post – likes, @replies and retweets – per year and country.

The lines for each country roughly follow the same trajectories – patterns that suggest a clear dominance of liking tweets rather than engaging with them otherwise. While some of the initial years of the studied time period feature a blend of retweets and likes as the most common form of user engagement (especially for Norway and Sweden), comparably later years indicate a clear dominance of likes, followed by retweets and @replies. To illustrate this development, a series of independent samples t-tests were performed comparing the means of likes with the means of @replies and retweets across all countries for the year 2020. For Denmark and Sweden, all differences emerging from these comparisons were significantly different from each other ($p < .05$ for all comparisons). For Norway, however, while the difference between likes and @replies emerged as significant ($p < .001$), the difference between likes and retweets did not ($p = 0.13$). In sum, not only has the studied time period seen clear changes in how parties approach Twitter – the ways that their potential supporters use the platform under scrutiny appears to have changed as well, with a “fairly low effort form of engagement” (Koc-Michalska et al., 2020: 10) largely overshadowing the other studied varieties.

Discussion

Featuring a structural, longitudinal overview of party Twitter use by political parties in the Scandinavian countries, the study at hand has provided a response to the calls from previous scholarship asking for comparative as well as over-time insights into online political communication processes. Once seen as an absolute must-use platform for political actors, the results presented here indicate that Twitter priorities and uses have indeed changed for parties and citizens alike. Remembering the ephemeral nature of online platforms, Bekafigo and McBride (2013) succinctly suggested that “even Twitter [...] may come and go” (2013: 638). Likely due to increased competition from other social media, where a larger number of potential supporters and voters can presumably be reached, securing user engagement on Twitter is likely considered less important now than in previous years. Consider, for instance, the over-time decline of the relative shares of @replies and @mentions by parties. Whereas the mentioned varieties of Twitter activity suggest interactive approaches and a willingness to engage with other users in discussion,

retweets – the dominating form of use at the end of the studied time period - can essentially be considered as redistribution of content that already existed on the platform. Granted, such redistribution could be seen as a form of empowerment for the user that posted the original tweet – nevertheless, the use of Twitter for “continuous dialogue” (Enli and Skogerbø, 2013: 770) appears largely as a thing of the past. With these as well as with the other results presented here in mind, it might be useful for future research projects to detail the overtime activities of party leaders and other individual politicians. Indeed, as previous scholarship has indicated, individual actors might approach these services with different uses in mind (e.g. Larsson and Ihlen, 2015) and a thorough examination of such actors might yield findings that could complement those presented here.

Similarly, while hashtags point users inward to the platform itself, encouraging increased perusal of content tagged as related to the initial tweet, URLs point the users outwards, to other web pages or other parts of the Internet. While some discrepancies could be found, the results presented here largely suggest that while the centripetal, inwards-facing hashtag feature was more employed over the years, the difference when compared to the centrifugal, outward-facing URL feature appears to be decreasing. Thus, the longitudinal design adopted here suggests that parties are changing their priorities with regards to these types of features. The specific nature of these hashtags – and indeed the destinations of the posted URLs – could make for interesting future enquiry, requiring other methods than those employed here.

Finally, Figure 5 showed similar patterns with regards to user engagement for all three countries. While user engagement increases over time, it does so primarily in terms of users liking tweets. As previous engagement patterns were shown in Figure 5 to have taken other forms, the trend is clear (with a slight caveat for the Norwegian case as discussed above): lightweight or indeed less demanding engagement forms have taken over in relation to the tweets sent by Scandinavian political parties. As similar patterns have been shown when studying comparable functionalities on other platforms – i.e., for sharing on Facebook (e.g. Larsson, 2019) – this development is indeed not unique for Twitter.

Viewing these results together with those discussed above, however, suggests clear changes in the ways Twitter has been prioritized and used by parties and citizens alike.

Twitter has been pointed to as a particularly important (Jacobs et al., 2020: 628) in what Chadwick (2017) has described as the hybrid media system, where old and new media logics connect, intermesh and thereby transform contemporary communication processes – be they political or not. The results presented here suggest a changing role of said platform in the combined Scandinavian political landscape. While we cannot be certain that these developments are due to the increased popularity of competing social media services, it nevertheless follows from the uncovered changing use patterns that as Twitter use evolves, so does the hybrid media system of which it is a part. Where Twitter has and has had a relatively open architecture, for instance allowing for non-reciprocal following and debates organized by hashtags as discussed above, such functionalities are not readily available on more dominant platforms – like Facebook. The affordances – the opportunities for action - of a given platform yields influence over the ways that citizens can connect to each other and indeed to their elected representatives. If, as the current study argues, a more open-ended platform such as Twitter is becoming less important in this regard, we might find it useful to ask what repercussions this will have for political debate, public discourse and for the public connection practices of citizens (Moe, 2020; Couldry et al., 2007).

A few suggestions for future work have already been made above. Beyond those ideas, another interesting venue for further inquiry into these and similar data could be to detail the types of accounts engaged with the parties studied here – who are the parties replying, mentioning and retweeting, and how do those behaviors change over time? On a more overarching scale, one further opportunity could be to widen the scope of countries included in comparative projects such as the one presented here. For instance, including non-western contexts (Blumler, 2015: 430) in our comparative efforts will increase our insights into how political communication has been shaped - and how it continues to be shaped. The problem with such efforts is of course the limited access to data that has become a reality after the API used for the study at hand was effectively terminated.

Hopefully, future prioritizations by Twitter – or indeed X as it is currently called – will result in different approaches to the wider research community.

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