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Between Broadcasting Political Messages and Interacting with Voters: The Use of Twitter during the 2010 UK General Election Campaign

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ABSTRACT

Politicians across Western democracies are increasingly adopting and experimenting with Twitter particularly during election time. The purpose of this article is to investigate how candidates are using it during an election campaign. The aim is to create a typology of the various ways in which candidates behaved on Twitter. Our research, which included a content analysis of tweets (n=26,282) from all twittering Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat candidates (n=416) during the 2010 UK General Election campaign, focused on four aspects of tweets: type, interaction, function and topic. By examining candidates' twittering behaviour, we show that British politicians mainly used Twitter as a unidirectional form of communication. However, there were a group of candidates who used it to interact with voters by, for example, mobilizing, helping and consulting them, thus tapping into the potential Twitter offers for facilitating a closer relationship with citizens.

Keywords: content analysis, election campaign, politicians, social media, Twitter, United Kingdom

Introduction

Twitter, with its estimated 140 million active users generating 340 million tweets a day, has become one of the most popular sites on the internet (Twitter 2012). More than any other social network, it has been successful in connecting ordinary people to the popular, powerful and influential. Politicians across Western democracies, their careers dependent on reaching as wide an audience as possible, are therefore increasingly embracing Twitter, especially during election time. For example, in the United States, usage by candidates (from the two main parties) during the 2010 mid-term election campaign was almost universal (Wallsten forthcoming). In the United Kingdom, the 2010 General Election saw Twitter make its place as one of the core communication tools amongst political and media elites as Newman (2010, p. 3) maintains: "It reached critical mass during this campaign and became an essential source of real-time information for journalists and politicians alike". The number of British MPs using Twitter has spiked over the past several years from just under eight per cent active in 2009 (Jackson & Lilleker 2011) to nearly two-thirds of MPs with an account in 2013 (Tweetminster 2013). So, how exactly are politicians using Twitter?

Early research into how British parties and politicians adopted the internet for campaign purposes has revealed that online campaigning tended to replicate traditional one-way, top-down communication flows (Coleman 2001; Jackson 2007). However, some scholars have argued that social media and its participatory culture and practices may help bridge the gap between politicians and citizens, fostering a mode of representation that is centred on interactive communication between the two (Coleman & Blumler 2009). Twitter is of particular interest given its popularity and defining characteristics, which offer an opportunity for developing a closer and more direct relationship between voters and politicians. The question then is how politicians are behaving on Twitter. Are they simply broadcasting their messages or are they beginning to tap into this participatory potential by engaging and interacting with the public?

This paper aims to address these questions by exploring the use of Twitter by British candidates during the 2010 General Election campaign, the ultimate aim being to establish a typology of twittering behaviour. In order to achieve this, a content analysis of 26,282 tweets produced by 416 candidates during the two weeks prior to the election was conducted. The findings reveal that, in some ways, it was indeed business as usual; candidates mainly used

Twitter to broadcast their messages, as a platform for partisan attacks, and as a means of acknowledging and thanking their supporters. However, given the nature of Twitter, such traditional behaviours potentially take on altered and even new meanings. Furthermore, there were a group of candidates who tapped into Twitter's potential for facilitating closer and more connected relationships with citizens.

Politicians' use of social media

In 1999, Blumler and Kavanagh (1999) mused on the possibilities the internet potentially offers for political communication. At the time, they found the use of online tools by political parties for communicative purposes to be embryonic; their impact was minimal (p. 222). Research from the 2001 and 2005 UK General Election campaigns showed that online campaigns tended to replicate the one-way communicative patterns that we have become familiar with in offline campaigning (Coleman 2001; Jackson 2007). However, with the rise of social media, scholars have once again envisioned its potential as a possible 'equalizer' for democracy, from levelling the playing field between established and new political parties (Small 2008), to bridging the gap between politics and the public (Coleman 2005b; Coleman & Blumler 2009).

Regarding the latter, one of the major challenges is that traditional politics in many Western democracies increasingly suffers from a decline in interest and participation (Flickinger and Studlar, 2007). Though voting turnout increased slightly in both the 2005 and 2010 UK General Elections from a historically low turnout in 2001 (McGuinness *et al.* 2012), many other indicators reveal that citizens are increasingly turning away from national politics. According to Hansard Society's (2012) *Audit of Political Engagement*, indicators such as political interest, knowledge and satisfaction are on a downward trend. Coleman (2005a) convincingly argues that this is partly a result of a breakdown in the sense of feeling represented by elected officials. He empirically shows via a national survey that politicians in the UK are failing to build meaningful connections with citizens. They felt their MPs were too distant, invisible, alien, arrogant and too partisan (see also Hansard Society 2012).

Based on these findings, Coleman (pp. 10-12) developed the concept of 'direct representation' that consists of three essential conditions. First, communication between representatives and citizens needs to be a two-way process. It requires a conversation, not just a

consultation. Representatives need to find ways of tapping into the everyday political talk that takes place among the public (see also Graham 2011). This requires the development of shared and trusted spaces where collaborative interaction between representatives and citizens can unfold and develop. Second, this conversation has to be of an on-going and permanent nature. Representation should be a continuous process rather than an aggregation of preferences during election time. Finally, elected representatives should start to 'account for themselves'. This is more than simply justifying, for example, their actions when challenged by the media, but rather it is a form of accountability whereby politicians pro-actively hold *themselves* accountable by regularly justifying their decisions to the public.

Given the interactive and participatory nature of social media and politicians' need to connect, it is no surprise that they are increasingly adopting these new communicative spaces. Twitter is of particular interest. Not only is it popular, its key features make it a potentially fruitful space for developing a more direct relationship, as Coleman describes, between politicians and citizens (see also Graham *et al.* 2013). Twitter's open and immediate structure can facilitate closeness and visibility. Indeed, Lee and Shin's (2012, p. 15) experimental research suggests that exposure to a politician's Twitter page heightens "a sense of direct, face-to-face conversation with him among those prone to get immersed in a mediated experience of others". Politicians who use Twitter regularly may be able to tap into the intimacy Twitter fosters. Additionally, Twitter is a social network site, which could allow a politician to foster a reciprocal relationship with citizens by, for example, interacting, sharing information and requesting public input. Twitter too can allow a candidate to engage in a conversation; candidates can listen to and engage in political talk with citizens in this mutually shared space. To what degree are politicians actually using Twitter to support this kind of relationship with citizens?

The empirical evidence (within various contexts) does not yet indicate a shift towards such a relationship. One of the most common findings is that politicians tend to use Twitter primarily to broadcast their messages as opposed to interacting with the public (Burgess & Bruns 2012; Glassman *et al.* 2010; Grant *et al.* 2010; Larsson & Moe 2011; Small 2010, 2011; Sæbø 2011). Golbeck's *et al.* (2010) analysis, for example, of over 6,000 tweets revealed that US national legislators primarily used Twitter to broadcast information and activities representing more than three-quarters of their sample. Similarly, Jackson and Lilleker (2011) found that British MPs used Twitter predominately as a tool for self-promotion – broadcasting events

attended and achievements in parliament. These studies suggest that social media is not yet changing significantly traditional political relationships, but there is still ample *terra incognita* left unexplored. In particular, what is needed is a more detailed and comprehensive account of how politicians behave on Twitter.

Much of the empirical research focuses on the networks and patterns of interaction that emerge via an analysis of specific hashtags in which politicians are just one of the many actors (Burgess & Bruns 2012; Larsson & Moe 2011; Small 2011). Studies that investigate politicians' twittering behaviour specifically are based on a network analysis (Vergeer *et al.* 2011), or focus on party leaders or sitting MPs/legislators (Glassman *et al.* 2010; Golbeck *et al.* 2010; Grant *et al.* 2010; Jackson & Lilleker 2011; Small 2010; Sæbø 2011). However, there are remarkably few studies of how political candidates (both incumbents and challengers) are behaving on Twitter during election time. Furthermore, studies that have focused specifically on politicians' behaviour have been limited in size and/or scope, or analytical categories were not always particular. To take two examples from previous studies: Sæbø (2011) conceptualizes seven distinct and detailed 'genres' of tweets covering form, content and purpose, but his typology is based on a small dataset. Conversely, Golbeck's *et al*. (2010) typology lacks nuance; the category 'information' encompasses a variety of behaviours. Moreover, the coding scheme mixes content with form. The authors consider interacting with another user and providing information to be mutually exclusive types of tweets while the latter can be the content of the former. There are also very few studies that investigate with whom politicians are interacting. Those that do examine this typically focus on the interaction of the *central* political actors in the Twittersphere (Ausserhofer & Maireder 2013; Larsson & Moe 2011). It is unclear if politicians use Twitter to interact with the public or are simply talking amongst themselves. Finally, there is little research on what topics politicians are twittering about, which is particularly relevant during an election campaign. Are they using Twitter to discuss and present their positions on key political issues?

Research focus and methodology

To improve our understanding of Twitter as a tool for political communication in general, and the manner in which politicians use it specifically, it is necessary to extend the analytical depth

of research into the subject. This research aims to do this by investigating how British candidates from the three main parties behave on Twitter during election time and seeks to answer four research questions:

RQ1: To what extent are British candidates using Twitter to interact with others?
RQ2: With whom are they interacting?
RQ3: About which societal/political topics are they twittering?
RQ4: What functions do their tweets serve?

By addressing these questions, we aim to construct a typology of twittering behaviour. In order to provide more depth to the analysis presented below, the quantitative findings will be supplemented by qualitative examples to demonstrate tendencies among candidates.

The Case

The 2010 General Election was an historical occasion. It saw the removal of the longstanding Labour government and resulted in the first coalition government since the Second World War. It was the first real competitive general election in nearly two decades with the third biggest party, the Liberal Democrats, entering the scene as possible contenders. The campaign itself consisted of several noteworthy moments and gaffes (see Newman 2010 for the campaign timeline). However, the most important by far was the arrival of the first ever televised Prime Ministerial Debates. This consisted of three debates between the main party leaders (Gordon Brown, Labour; David Cameron, Conservatives; Nick Clegg, Liberal Democrats), which were aired on ITV (15 April), Sky (22 April) and the BBC (29 April). The debates were seen by millions, reached more voters than any other episodic televised campaign coverage, and dominated the election campaign, particularly news media coverage (see e.g. Coleman *et al.* 2010).[1]

Population and sample

The population consisted of all twittering candidates from the three main parties. First, a list of all candidates who had a Twitter account was compiled. This was carried out initially on 21 April 2010 and subsequently re-checked on 29 April and 6 May to ensure that any new accounts

were included. The list was gathered by consulting the party websites. For candidates where an account was not listed, two additional searches were conducted via the website www.election-tweets.co.uk/ (a site that supposedly followed all candidates) and the Twitter search function. Of the 454 candidates with an account, those who posted one or more tweets during the two weeks of the campaign (n=416) were included in the analysis.

The start of the election campaign began on 6 April and ended on polling day 6 May 2010. In order to make the study more manageable while maintaining the meaningfulness of the data, the sample of tweets was based on a 15-day period. All tweets posted during 22 April – 6 May (n=26,282) were included in the analysis. The final two weeks were selected as these are typically the most active weeks during a campaign.

Coding categories

A content analysis was employed as the primary instrument for examination. The coding scheme was developed as a means of identifying and describing politicians' posting behaviour. The unit of analysis was the individual tweet. The context unit of analysis was the thread in which it was situated. The context played an integral role in the coding process because tweets are often posted in the form of interaction, which range from a single pair of tweets to a string of tweets. Thus, in order to maintain the social integrity of these interactions, coders coded politicians' tweets in chronological order.

The coding scheme focused on four aspects of each tweet. First, the type of tweet was identified. Four tweet types were distinguished: normal post, @-reply, retweet (the symbols used are e.g. , 'RT' or 'via') and retweet with comment (e.g. 'That's ridicules [*sic*]! RT @nigel4selby Our party has always been big on the environment!').

Second, all those tweets coded as @-replies were subsequently coded for with whom they were interacting. Tweets were coded as one of the following categories: (1) public/citizen, (2) journalist/media, (3) lobbyist, (4) expert, (5) industry, (6) authority (e.g. police, campaign regulators), (7) celebrity, (8-11) politician (Conservative, Labour, LibDem, other party), and (12) party activist (e.g. campaign team, volunteers). In order to make the classification, coders first consulted the user's Twitter profile; then, if needed, the hyperlink provided in a user's description.[2] All Twitter IDs were then cross-referenced with a comprehensive list of twittering

candidates from all seat-holding parties in the UK. These two steps along with the context in which the tweet was posted allowed a coder to classify the user.

Third, all tweets were coded for their function: (1) (update from the) campaign trail, (2) campaign promotion, (3) campaign action, (4) call to vote, (5) political news/report, (6) other news/report, (7) position taking/own stance, (8) party stance, (9) critiquing/arguing, (10) requesting public input, (11) advice giving/helping, (12) acknowledgement, (13) personal and (14) other. In those cases where a tweet had multiple functions, coders were trained to use a set of rules and procedures for identifying the dominant function (e.g. the function comprising of the most characters).

Finally, in order to identify the topic, coders categorized the *primary* topic of each tweet. Tweets were coded as one of the following categories: (1) animal rights, (2) civil and human rights, (3) crime and judicial proceedings, (4) business and economy, (5) education, (6) environment, (7) EU, (8) government, (9) health and social welfare, (10) immigration, (11) military and defence, (12) religion, (13) science and technology, (14) war and conflicts, (15) world events, (16) national events and heritage, (17) infrastructure, (18) campaign and party affairs and (19) norms and values.

Reliability

The coding was carried out by a team of six coders.[3] In addition to the two coding trainers (Peter & Lauf 2002), four additional coders were trained over two training sessions and assigned to code approximately a sixth of the sample each. In order to compensate for the context unit of analysis, a form of cluster sampling was utilized. The intercoder reliability test was based on a set of tweets taken from a random sample of ten per cent of the twittering candidates. For each candidate, ten tweets in sequential order were randomly selected. Cohen's kappa was used to estimate intercoder reliability. It was chosen because it is a conservative measure; it does not give credit for chance agreement. The reliability scores for the average pairwise Cohen's kappa were as follows: type 0.97, interaction with 0.76, function 0.66, topic 0.67.

The twittering candidate

In this section, we will first provide an overview of the volume and frequency of twittering candidates and tweets posted. As Table 1 indicates, 22 per cent of candidates posted at least one tweet during the two weeks of the election campaign. Not only were there more Liberal Democrat candidates using Twitter, they also posted substantially more tweets (as Table 2 shows), accounting for nearly half of total tweets posted and averaging 78 tweets per candidate in comparison to 63 and 44 tweets for Labour and the Conservatives respectively. However, averages are slightly misleading given the divergence in posting rates among candidates.

[Insert Table 1 & 2 about here]

As a means of providing more nuances, Table 3 reveals the rate and distribution of tweets. As is shown, the distribution was far from egalitarian: 64 per cent of candidates posted less than 50 tweets, accounting for only 19 per cent of the total tweets while 18 per cent (candidates posting a 100 or more tweets) were responsible for close to two-thirds of tweets posted. The Liberal Democrats and Labour had the most prolific twittering candidates; 62 of the 74 candidates posting 100 plus tweets were from the Liberal Democrats (37) and Labour (25). Their active use of Twitter is consistent with the campaign strategies of both parties. Unlike the Conservatives, they actively encouraged and facilitated the use of Twitter during the campaign (Fisher *et al.* 2011; Newman 2010), which is reflected in our findings.[4]

When we examine the tweet count per day, we find a common pattern among all three parties. As Figure 1 shows, there were four peak days of posting activity; 39 per cent of the total tweets were posted during these days. April 22 and 29 were the most active twittering days. This activity corresponds with the final two televised Prime Ministerial Debates. Many of the tweets posted were in direct response to these debates, particularly among Conservative candidates. April 22 also marked a string of attacks by the Tory press on party leader Nick Clegg. A substantial portion of tweets from the Liberal Democrat candidates was in response to this news coverage. Indeed, the attacks provoked the Twitter community to blame the world's problems on Clegg, known as '#NickCleggsFault'; many of the Liberal Democrat candidates participated in this development, which in turn received considerable news coverage. The final two days of the campaign also hosted a sizeable amount of twittering activity, particularly among the Liberal

Democrats and Labour. Much of this consisted of promoting their parties, and acknowledging and thanking their supporters.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

There seems to be a reciprocal relationship between the political Twittersphere on one hand and offline events and media coverage on the other. The debates that dominated the 2010 General Election campaign and its news coverage (Coleman *et al.* 2010; Deacon & Wring 2011; Gaber 2010) also played a substantial role in shaping candidates' twittering behaviour. The effect of these debates was not confined to political insiders and the media. As Scullion's *et al.* (forthcoming) research shows, election talk among British voters was also dominated by the debates. The interplay between Twitter and traditional mass media is in line with studies of the 2010 Australian and Swedish elections (Burgess & Bruns 2012; Larsson & Moe 2011).

Twittering behaviour

Regarding the type of tweet, as Table 4 shows, 32 per cent of all tweets were in the form of @-replies. There was a clear difference between the three parties. Conservative candidates used Twitter mainly as a form of unidirectional communication; 81 per cent of their tweets represented either a normal post, retweet or retweet with comment.[5] Labour and the Liberal Democrats, on the other hand, used Twitter substantially more often to interact with others, representing 47 and 42 per cent respectively. This can partly be explained by two factors. Unlike the Conservatives, the other two parties not only had campaign strategies that fostered Twitter use, but they also had a history of encouraging such practices (Fisher *et al.* 2011; Jackson & Lilleker 2011; Newman, 2010). Consequently, many of their candidates were early adopters, affording them time to develop their twittering practices.

[Insert Table 4 about here]

With whom were candidates interacting? As Table 5 shows, it was largely with members of the public (59%) followed by politicians (16%), journalists (10%) and party activists (8%). Interaction with the public typically came in the form of acknowledgments (e.g. thanking),

debating and taking a position on an issue. Candidates interacted with politicians and journalists in a similar fashion, however, focusing more on attacking and debating. There were two noteworthy differences between the parties. First, Labour and Liberal Democrats used Twitter more often to interact with party activists, mostly to organize campaign activities or to thank them for their support. This is no surprise as both parties had online campaign strategies that emphasized using the internet (Twitter in particular) to mobilize their base (Fisher *et al.* 2011; Newman, 2010; Straw, 2010). Second, Liberal Democrats interacted less with journalists. This may have something to do with the fact that they were the smallest party; therefore, in some constituencies, their candidates attracted less media attention.

[Insert Table 5 about here]

About which topics were candidates twittering? Eighty per cent of (valid) tweets were about campaign and party affairs.[6] This included campaigning activities (e.g. events, strategies, promotion, polling, media coverage) and party affairs (e.g. coalition partners, leadership, personalities). The level of policy talk, on the other hand, was minimal. For all three parties, business and economy was the next most common topic, accounting for only 4 per cent of tweets. Only two other topics (government and health & social welfare) were above 2 per cent. This finding mirrors studies of 2010 Election news coverage, which found that there was very little real policy discussion; it largely focused on personalities, and campaign strategies and tactics (Gaber forthcoming; Deacon & Wring 2011). This partly has to do with the impact of the debates on the campaign. Not only did news coverage tend to focus upon the debates as 'strategic performances' (Coleman *et al.* 2011), candidates' reactions to them too, as will be discussed below, typically focused on style and performance.

From broadcasting political messages to interacting with the public

To refine the principal difference between broadcasting and interacting and to provide more depth to our understanding of politicians' twittering behaviour, the functions of tweets were coded. The results for all 14 functions are presented in Appendix 1. Based upon these empirical findings, along with the findings from the categories discussed above, we present and discuss below our typology of candidates twittering behaviour. Broadcasting is a form of unidirectional

communication and the behaviours listed under it are primarily used in this manner. Interaction consists of behaviours that are based on reciprocity and are typically about engaging others.[7]

[Insert Table 6 about here]

As Table 6 shows, 68 per cent of all tweets represented one of the five broadcasting behaviours. The most frequent behaviour was *updating* accounting for slightly less than a quarter of all tweets. This included tweets where candidates posted an update from the campaign trail such as status or location updates and reports on campaign events. Updating was slightly more common among Conservative candidates, particularly among infrequent posters (posting less than 50 tweets). Labour too promoted the use of the hashtag '#labourdoorstep' as a means of sharing positive experiences on the campaign trail.

It might not seem like it at first, but in some ways, updating from the campaign trail is a new type of behaviour. Twitter conveniently allows candidates to post real-time updates in a virtual public space, which is difficult to do via traditional media outlets. Updating potentially creates visibility for a candidate and might foster a sense of closeness between them and the public. It may cultivate a sense of inclusion among active followers[8], particularly candidates that use it in combination with other behaviours, making them feel part of the campaign, as though they are out there canvassing with them.

Promoting was the second most common behaviour representing 21 per cent of tweets. This included tweets in which a candidate promoted him/herself, a fellow politician, the party or other organization. In addition to the typical 'party poster promotion', candidates frequently promoted the ability, skills or performance of themselves or their party/party leader:

And there you go...David Cameron, performs at his best under the greatest pressure. Resounding victory #leadersdebate
(@louisebagshawe), April 29, 23:04

As the tweet from Conservative Louise Mensch illustrates, promoting was commonly used in connection with the televised debates.

Liberal Democrat candidates used Twitter for promoting substantially more often than the other two parties did. This might be the result of them being a smaller party; thus, they felt the need to promote more. Some Liberal Democrat candidates were creative when it came to promoting:

I'm looking for some non-celeb endorsements today :)
(@CllrDaisyBenson), April 29, 16:30

Liberal Democrat Daisy Benson on occasions solicited endorsements from voters in her constituency. The tweet above received several praises from voters. Candidates too would post a tweet about conversations they had with constituents, which were typically compliments regarding their ability, dedication and/or performance.

Campaign promotion is a traditional broadcasting behaviour used during election time, and Twitter provides candidates with another communicative platform to promote themselves and their party. However, as the example above shows, candidates, particularly the Liberal Democrats, used Twitter to tap into their followers as a means of self-promotion. Moreover, unlike traditional media outlets, promotion via Twitter is free and direct.

Critiquing accounted for 17 per cent of tweets. This typically included tweets in which a candidate criticized, challenged or contradicted another politician, party or other organization in a political context. Much of this consisted of (superficial) partisan attacks:

Clegg on the ropes - I need to look away #leadersdebate
(@EricPickles), April 29, 22:32

As Conservative Eric Pickles's tweet above indicates, the debates attracted this type of behaviour, much of which focused on style and performance. More than a third of critiquing tweets were posted in response to the debates. This was particularly true for the Conservatives. Critiquing was more prevalent among their candidates, and much of this was directed at the two debates, representing nearly half of these tweets. Ironically, the debates were meant to promote public deliberation and discussion on the important issues, but the outcome was that voters (Scullion *et al.* forthcoming) and candidates alike tended to debate about performance and style.

For both Labour and the Liberal Democrats, these types of attacks were also directed at the news media. For Labour, this is no surprise given that, with the exception of the *Daily Mirror,* they faced a hostile press. For some candidates, especially Tom Watson, Twitter became a platform to take on the press. For the Liberal Democrats, much of this was in response to the Tory press attacks on their party leader Nick Clegg.

Overall, this type of behaviour, the 'Punch and Judy' style of politics, offers little in terms of facilitating a closer relationship with voters. The two debates in particular seemed to foster a polarized Twittersphere. As Coleman's (2005a) study suggests, citizens are tired of such partisan politics. Furthermore, Jackson's (forthcoming 2011) research has shown that this style of politics demobilizes voters; it turns them away from politics. Indeed, the public on numerous occasions called candidates out for such behaviour. Many of the candidates too complained about this type of behaviour, yet they were doing it themselves. It seems Twitter's 140-character limit is more conducive to superficial attacks as opposed to substantial critical arguments on the issues, which is in line with Pew's (2011) findings.

Information disseminating, which accounted for 4 per cent of tweets, included posts where a candidate provided news (typically by dropping links) or other factual information (e.g. government reports). One of the appealing characteristics of Twitter is that it allows a candidate to disseminate information directly (unmediated) to citizens. The Liberal Democrat candidates took advantage of this by frequently posting links to research reports from various sources. However, for the other two parties, candidates dropped links mostly to the BBC and British press.

Finally, *position taking* accounted for only 3 per cent of tweets. This included tweets in which a candidate posted his/her opinion, argument or the party position on a political issue as the example below illustrates:

I'm against i.d. cards, tuition fees, & inequality. I'm in favour of civil liberties, free education & asset taxes. #voteld #gonick
(@clwppc), April 29, 12:16

As the tweet from Liberal Democrat Naomi Smith shows, many of these tweets acted more as campaign sound bites. This has to do partly with Twitter's 140-characters limit. Given this

constraint, some candidates would drop a link to their blog/website/Facebook account where a more detailed position was available.

[Insert Table 7 about here]

As Table 7 reveals, interaction, which account for 26 per cent of all tweets, consisted of five behaviours. The most common type of interaction was *attacking/debating* representing 10 per cent of tweets. Many of the tweets were attack style orientated as the example below demonstrates:

@jerryhayes1 We obviously will not agree, but Cameron most lightweight Con leader I have ever seen. At least you knew where you stood in past
Andrew Lewin (@Alewin7), LibDem, April 29, 22:58.

Most of these exchanges lacked continuity; i.e. they were typically one-off interactions. Moreover, they tended to be highly partisan (often *ad hominem* attacks as the example above) and focused mostly on party and campaign affairs. Extended debates on substantial issues were rare.

Acknowledging, which accounted for 10 per cent of tweets, included tweets in which a candidate thanked, complimented or provided words of encouragement to another person or organization. Thanking voters and party activists for their support along with wishing other politicians success accounted for more than three-fourths of these tweets. Much of this took place on the final two days of the campaign, totalling more than a third of acknowledgments.

Another type of behaviour under interacting was *mobilizing and organizing*, which accounted for 4 per cent of tweets. This included tweets where a candidate called for direct action, typically to sign a petition or to join the campaign team. Regarding the latter, unlike the Conservatives, the Liberal Democrats and Labour used Twitter to mobilize their base, mainly to recruit volunteers and organize their campaign activities. This finding is consistent with the parties' online campaign strategies (Fisher *et al.* 2011; Newman 2010; Straw 2010). Evan Harris, who posted an astonishing 1,342 tweets, frequently used Twitter to recruit volunteers, particularly after meeting new followers.

Overall, Twitter seemed to be a useful communicative tool for mobilizing and organizing the party base. Moreover, similar to updating, such behaviour via Twitter may create a sense of closeness with the public. For example, citizens who actively follow candidates are able to get a glimpse of 'behind the scene' of campaign activities.

Advice giving and helping, which represented 2 per cent of tweets, was another behaviour identified. Much of the advice and help was concerning the election (e.g. postal ballots and voting districts). There were occasions when helping moved beyond issues concerning the election. Labour candidate Stella Creasy and Liberal Democrat Daisy Benson were active helping people in their constituencies:

@Leanne_Online there are support services- what sort of cv is it? Email me and will put you in touch with them?
(@stellacreasy), April 22, 11:42

The final and least frequent behaviour was *consulting*, comprising of only 1 per cent of tweets. This included tweets where a candidate requested public input on a specific political issue or simply when a candidate was trying to find out what mattered to his/her constituents as the example below exemplifies:

Tell me!!!....What is the key local issue that will influence the way local people will vote in Bournemouth East?
Lisa Northover, LibDem, April 26, 21:18

Only a handful of candidates employed this type of behaviour regularly including Stella Creasy and David Kidney (Labour); and Layla Moran, Evan Harris and Lisa Northover (LibDems).

Constituency work such as advice giving, helping and consulting is something that candidates have always done. However, Twitter makes these personal exchanges between candidates and voters public. It allows candidates to create a sense of accessibility, thereby facilitating what Coleman and Blumler (2009) call 'mutuality'. It feels as though they are in touch and just one tweet away. Moreover, using social media like Twitter as a means of facilitating a locally focused campaign seems to be effective, for example, Stella Creasy

contributed her electoral success to her use of Twitter and other social media in this manner (Creasy in Williamson 2010). However, given the infrequency of such behaviour, the potential benefits were largely missed.

Conclusion

Allistair Campbell, the notorious spin-doctor of Tony Blair, once said that communication is not something that should be 'tagged on the end' of politics. Instead, it should be part and parcel of what politicians do on a daily basis (quoted in Gaber 2000, p. 507). A continuous cycle of testing the waters, developing ideas and policy, and 'selling' these to citizens has indeed become one of the key mechanism in the business of politics. The rise of social media has provided the toolkit of political communication with an invaluable add-on to establish on-going communication. It allows politicians to reach a growing group of citizens while especially Twitter has also become a beat that facilitates the professional exchange between journalists, lobbyists and opinion makers (Broersma & Graham 2012). As we have shown, 22 per cent of the candidates during the 2010 UK Election recognized the opportunities Twitter provides to convey their messages to the public. Especially the Liberal Democrats, who were responsible for about half of the candidate's tweets, were passionate communicators in 140-characters. Labour (32 per cent) and the Conservatives (20 per cent) had a relatively smaller share in the 26,282 tweets, but also actively incorporated Twitter in their communication strategies.

Social media provide politicians with, on one hand, private channels for unidirectional communication, and, on the other, they enable multi-directional communication within a network of citizens. While, in scholarship, the first is usually (dis)regarded as transposing traditional communicative patterns to an online environment, the latter is seen as an opportunity for politicians to engage with citizens in conversations leading to more direct or connected forms of representation (Coleman 2005a; Graham *et al.* 2013). In this paper, we developed a typology of five broadcasting and five interactive behaviours on Twitter. We argue that both broadcasting and interaction results in meaningful differences with traditional one-way political communication through mass media, party material and traditional campaign activities.

Our research shows that slightly more than two-third of the candidates' tweets were used to broadcast particular information. Giving updates from the campaign trail, promoting

themselves or party members, and critiquing opponents are central to the "hoopla" and "horse race" element of election campaigns. While this made up 61 per cent of the total number of tweets, only 7 per cent focused on conveying political issues, either in the form of disseminating information or putting across a political stance. This pattern is reflected in the topics that were discussed. The candidates twittered mostly (80 per cent) about campaign and party affairs and seldom about political issues. The election campaign on Twitter replicated the off-line one, focusing on political strategies, campaigning tactics and personal squabble. This kind of behaviour discourages citizens instead of engaging them with politics (see e.g. Jackson, forthcoming).

However, at the broadcasting level, the most important difference with traditional campaigning is that it gives politicians more control over the content of their message as well as over its pace and time of distribution. Candidates now have the opportunity to communicate directly, continuously and unrestrictedly with the audience and are not dependent on either processes of selection, framing and interpretation by journalists or party funding and activities. The option to get every message out whenever they want and how they want it could give, theoretically, politicians more freedom to communicate spontaneously with citizens and to focus their campaign at the constituency level. Interestingly, the percentage of challenging candidates who twittered was much higher than that of the sitting Conservative and Labour MPs (15 vs. 21 per cent and 16 vs. 29 per cent respectively). This seems to be in line with earlier research (Fisher *et al.* 2010) that found that social media, due to their relatively low costs, were particularly applied by challengers in campaigns for "hopeless" seats, and to a lesser extent "target" seats. However, more research into this possible causal connection would be welcomed.

Moreover, the importance of Twitter for campaigning might be for a large part in its interaction with mass media and the opportunities it offers to spin campaign topics. Many tweets were in response to television and newspaper coverage. Moreover, politicians are well aware of the fact that the effect of a tweet multiplies when its message is picked up by traditional media. Dropping a few lines in a tweet might change the angle of news stories and consequently public debate. Because journalists are using Twitter as an "awareness system" that informs them about the course and heat of political and societal discussions, a well-placed string of tweets can have a decisive influence on the political climate (Hermida 2010; Broersma & Graham 2012).

Even if the large majority of tweets fell under broadcasting, still 26 per cent of all tweets were reciprocal. Although we did not account for the 'followers' of politicians, it turned out that candidates were mostly engaging with members of the public (59 per cent) while in almost 10 per cent of the cases journalists were at the other end. When candidates were talking with other politicians, they mainly belonged to the same party while party activists took part in 8 per cent of the interactions. A similar trend was found when taking the nature of interaction into account. Mobilizing constituents to help with the campaign, acknowledging voters and requesting information were the most prominent categories while getting into a debate – or argument – with others on political issues took only part in 10 per cent of tweets. Even in this category, however, interaction took mainly the form of one-off attacks on other politicians. Lengthier debates on political issues were much scarcer. This is also due to the 140-character limit of tweets. Candidates often requested to move these types of exchanges elsewhere (e.g. via email).

Twitter thus mainly functioned as a tool to involve the party base in the election campaign and to maintain social relations by acknowledging others or giving them advice. As a channel to discuss political issues and exchange arguments, Twitter was less important. However, our sample of two weeks before the general election might obscure the situation. It could be possible that the number of twittering politicians and tweets (temporarily) rises before the ballot and these 'newcomers' might only use Twitter in a traditional broadcasting manner as opposed to politicians that have been active for a while and have developed a network. Moreover, it might be that an election campaign triggers broadcasting of political messages and campaign updates while politicians on Twitter might be more responsive to their followers and interacting with them in 'off peak' periods. More longitudinal and internationally comparative research of the content of politician's tweets is thus necessary. Analysis of variables such as incumbency might provide more nuance just like multivariate analysis. Further issues that could be interesting to explore revolve around questions of gender, and to what extent socially constructed expectations of politicians' gender roles impact tweets or, more intriguingly, the way followers interact with the tweets of candidates.

Our findings indicate that Twitter could indeed involve people in the political process by either broadcasting information on the campaign or interaction with others, and mobilize and acknowledge them. Tapping into the potential Twitter offers for creating a closer and more

connected relationship with citizens might increase democratic engagement. Most twittering candidates, however, turned out to be quite conservative. Not only did they replicate the off-line campaign's focus on style, performance and strategy, the use of Twitter was also partly dependent on interaction with traditional mass media. Nevertheless, 19 per cent of the candidates' tweets interacted in one way or another with voters. On first sight this might not seem such a large percentage, but as Wright (2012, p. 249) correctly argues, 'in the face of all the hyping of technology, there is a danger that an implicitly pessimistic mindset is adopted' by researchers. Compared to other forms of political communication during the election campaign, we argue that this level of interaction with voters is quite substantial. An open question is if politicians will seize the opportunities for connectivity that social media offer even more than they do already and if future use will thus stimulate an even more engaged and more permanent relationship between politicians and citizens.

Notes

1 See the collection of chapters in Wring *et al.* (2011) for a comprehensive analysis of the campaign.

2 Google searches were permitted if necessary.

3 This study is part of a larger comparative study between British and Dutch twittering candidates during the 2010 Elections.

4 This finding is in line with previous studies, which suggest that progressive parties are more likely to adopt new social media (Ausserhofer & Maireder, 2013; Lilleker & Koc-Michalska, forthcoming; Vergeer *et al.* 2011). One possible explanation is that these parties tend to be smaller (minor parties) and younger and thus more open to new communicative practices. However, such speculation goes beyond our analysis and would require e.g. interviews with politicians, campaign strategists, etc.

5 We treated retweets as a form of unidirectional communication; candidates primarily retweeted tweets that were campaign promotion and partisan attacks.

6 For 2,182 tweets, the topic was not applicable.

7 The categories for each group are not mutually exclusive. For example, on occasions, updates from the campaign trail were conveyed via interaction with another person. However, updating tended to be communicated via broadcasting rather than through interaction.

8 The number of followers at the time of archiving ranged from 8 for Mark Reckless (Conservative) to 35,406 for party leader Nick Clegg. The mean was 825 with a median of 314 followers. However, the number of followers is a bit misleading. It says nothing about *active* followers (those followers who actually read a candidates tweets) and it ignores those people who visit a candidates Twitter page or use websites such as Election-tweets and Tweetminister to actively read and follow candidates. See also Ausserhofer and Maireder (2013) critique. See also Gibson *et al.* (2010) for the level of citizen participation via social media during the 2010 Election.

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TABLE 1**:** Twittering candidates by party

	# twittering candidates	% twittering candidates
Conservatives	118	18.7
Labour	136	21.6
LibDems	162	25.7
Total	416	22.0

TABLE 2: Frequency of tweets by party

	# tweets	% of total tweets	Mean per candidate	Median
Conservatives	5,168	19.7	43.80	22.00
Labour	8,469	32.2	62.27	30.50
LibDems	12,645	48.1	78.06	36.00
Total	26,282		63.18	30.00

TABLE 3: Rate and distribution of tweets

	Tweet rate			Tweet distribution		
Tweets	# Participant	%	Cumulative %	# Posting	%	Cumulative %
1	16	3.8	3.8	16	0.0	0.0
2-9	77	18.5	22.4	426	1.6	1.7
10-49	175	42.1	64.4	4422	16.8	18.5
50-99	74	17.8	82.2	5319	20.2	38.7
100-199	50	12.0	94.2	6820	25.9	64.7
200-400	16	3.8	98.1	4151	15.8	80.5
>400	8	1.9	100	5128	19.5	100
Total	416	100				

Figure 1: Tweet count over fifteen days of the campaign

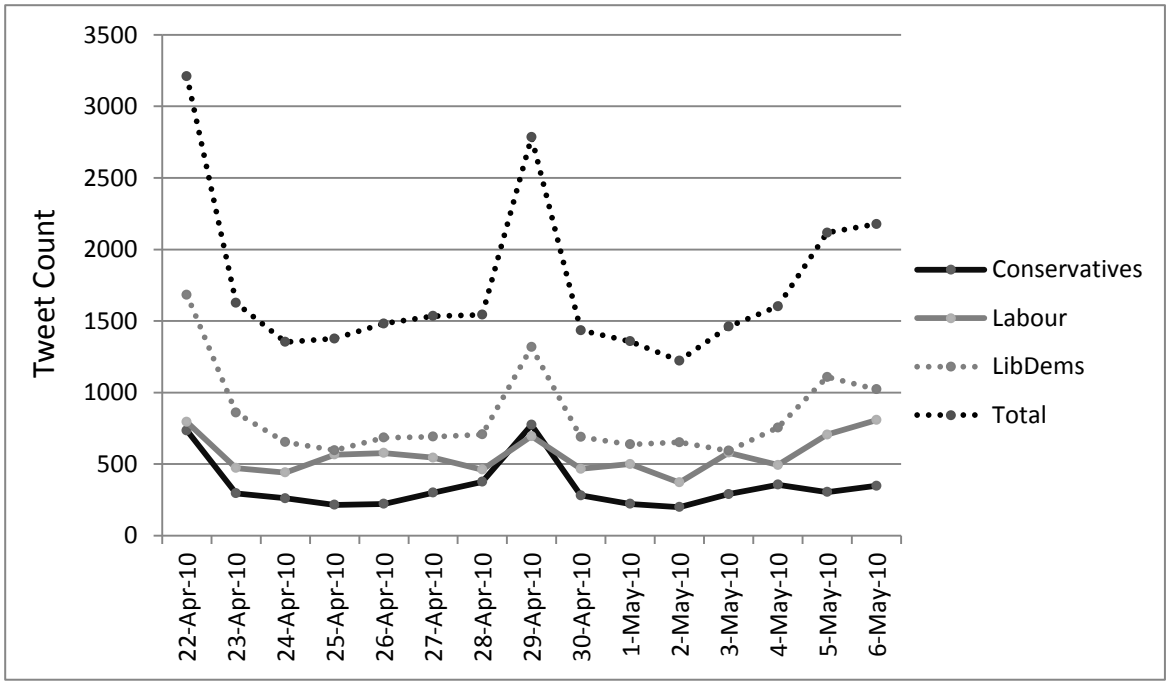

TABLE 4: Type of tweet posted

	Frequency of tweets within political party			
	Conservatives	Labour	LibDems	Total
Normal post	3,307	4,012	5,361	12,680
	64.0%	47.4%	42.4%	48.2%
@-Replies	960	3,205	4,184	8,349
	18.6%	37.8%	33.1%	31.8%
Retweet	855	1,023	2,896	4,774
	16.5%	12.1%	22.9%	18.2%
Retweet with comment	46	229	204	479
	0.9%	2.7%	1.6%	1.8%

TABLE 5: With whom were candidates interacting?

	Frequency of (interactive) tweets within political party			
	Conservatives	Labour	LibDems	Total
Public	615	1,723	2,596	4,934
	64.1%	53.8%	62.0%	59.1%
Politician/Candidate	160	567	591	1318
	16.7%	17.7%	14.1%	15.8%
Journalist/Media	113	376	329	818
	11.8%	11.7%	7.9%	9.8%
Party Activist	23	237	394	654
	2.4%	7.4%	9.4%	7.8%
Lobbyist	11	191	99	314
	2.5%	6.0%	2.4%	3.8%
Expert	8	48	65	121
	0.8%	1.5%	1.6%	1.4%
Celebrity	5	32	61	98
	0.5%	1.0%	1.5%	1.2%
Industry	11	27	44	82
	1.1%	0.8%	1.1%	1.0%
Authority	1	4	5	10
	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%
Total	960	3205	4184	8349
	100%	100%	100%	100%

TABLE 6: Candidates' twittering behaviour in percentages

	Broadcasting					
	Percentage of total tweets within political party					
	Updating	Promoting	Critiquing	Information disseminating	Own/Party stance	Total
Conservatives	30.0	15.8	26.1	2.5	2.9	77.2
Labour	24.9	17.7	15.2	3.5	2.8	64.1
LibDems	19.0	25.0	14.4	5.1	3.8	67.3
Total	23.1	20.9	17.0	4.1	3.3	68.3

TABLE 7: Candidates' twittering behaviour in percentages

	Interaction					
	Percentage of total tweets within political party					
	Debating/Position taking	Acknowledging	Organizing/ Mobilizing	Advice giving/Helping	Consulting	Total
Conservatives	7.5	7.1	1.7	0.5	0.4	17.2
Labour	12.1	11.0	2.8	2.6	1.8	30.3
LibDems	9.5	10.0	5.1	2.5	0.5	27.6
Total	9.9	9.7	3.7	2.1	0.9	26.3

APPENDIX 1: The function of candidates tweets

	Frequency of tweets within political party			
	Conservatives	Labour	LibDems	Total
Campaign trail (update)	1552	2112	2407	6071
	30.0%	24.9%	19.0%	23.1%
Campaign promotion	814	1503	3167	5484
	15.8%	17.7%	25.0%	20.9%
Campaign action	52	218	584	854
	1.0%	2.6%	4.6%	3.2%
Call to vote	36	15	57	108
	0.7%	0.2%	0.5%	0.4%
Political news/report	108	259	585	952
	2.1%	3.1%	4.6%	3.6%
Other news/report	20	41	64	125
	0.4%	0.5%	0.5%	0.5%
Own stance/position	172	519	776	1467
	3.3%	6.1%	6.1%	5.6%
Party stance/position	94	69	280	443
	1.8%	0.8%	2.2%	1.7%
Criticism/arguing	1617	1959	2446	6022
	31.3%	23.1%	19.3%	22.9%
Requesting public input	20	149	61	230
	0.4%	1.8%	0.5%	0.9%
Advice giving/helping	28	224	310	562
	0.5%	2.6%	2.5%	2.1%
Acknowledgements	367	932	1263	2562
	7.1%	11.0%	10.0%	9.7%
Other	288	469	645	1402
	5.6%	5.5%	5.1%	5.3%
Total	5168	8469	12645	26282
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Note: Tweets coded as personal and other are collapsed under the function *other*.