Chapter 4
A Study of Politicians in a Hybrid Media Setting During the 2014 Swedish Elections: A Logic Polarisation and Dissent

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ABSTRACT

This chapter attends to the interactions between campaigning politicians and traditional news media in an online space of social networking. Studying campaigning Parliamentarians on Twitter during the 2014 Swedish election, traditional news media and their online presences represented a form of authority. The interactions were often charged with emotions and could be understood as a way to negotiate status and group (party) belonging, something that is particularly important for campaigning politicians in a party-based democracy like Sweden. By studying the interactions between Parliamentarians and traditional news media, the study concludes that Parliamentarians were expected to be angry and upset with political opponents in front of their party comrades. Hence the mass media logic of conflict is transferred online and also with network media logic, favouring attention-maximising, witty one-liners. This foregrounds polarisation and dissent at the expense of discussion and debate.

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter attends to interactions between MPs (Members of Parliament) and traditional news media on Twitter during the 2014 Swedish election campaign. The research question the chapter attends to is how campaigning politicians interacted with journalists and traditional news media on Twitter during the 2014 elections. In particular the chapter attends to how mass media and network media logics intersected in this context of campaigning MPs interacting with traditional news media.

Today a great deal of the social and political dynamics of public life takes place online and we therefore need to pay attention to issues related to the use of social media platforms in relation to news and politics. We live in a hybrid media system, in which the online and the offline intersect, actors and agency are shaped by older as well as newer logics (Chadwick, 2013). One way such hybridity is manifested is in political actors’ interaction with traditional news media and journalists online. In my previous studies of online participation, traditional news media (and their online presences) have represented a form of authority (Svensson, 2015; Svensson & Larsson, 2016). If your position on a political issue could be verified by a link to a traditional news media outlet, it would strengthen the validity of that position. Hence, to link to traditional news media in online discussions becomes a ‘link of verification’ (Svensson, 2015); displaying a ‘privileged access to the truth’ (Carpentier, 2014). Traditional news media and their representatives – as long as they confirm users’ standpoints – indeed seems to represent valuable sources of information.

I became aware of this practice when studying participation in a so-called online cultural public sphere (Hermes, 2006), a LGBTQ dating site and political discussions there (Svensson, 2015). Debaters linked to traditional news – mostly tabloid newspapers – to prove their point, that they were right and their opponents wrong. This practice reappeared in a data set of Swedish MPs on Twitter during the 2014 elections. When MPs attacked political opponents on Twitter, or retweeted party/alliance comrades, journalists and links to traditional news texts were often used to justify their stances (Svensson & Larsson, 2016). Through such practices, political actors strategically negotiated status and group (i.e. party belonging), something that is particularly important for politicians campaigning in a party-based democracy like Sweden (Arter, 1999). To make a political career in a party-based democracy, it is within the party you need to position yourself as it is mainly your party comrades that hold the keys to political positions. In this chapter, campaigning Swedish MPs online interactions are therefore understood as reflexive and strategic, (here two sides of the same coin). Reflexively negotiating group/ party belonging and strategically seeking advantages campaign-wise – as well as strategically positioning one-self within the party hierarchy – are not seen as in a dichotomous relationship to each other here.
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