

Political Public Relations on the Net: A Relationship Management Perspective

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Research on relationship management in digital political public relations is scarce. Departing from a relationship management perspective, then, this study seeks to contribute to the field of political public relations by investigating whether political parties take advantage of what digital media platforms offer in terms of long-term commitment and reciprocity utilizing the Swedish national election in 2010 as a case study. The results show that the political parties utilized social media outlets primarily during and just before the time of the election and that interaction between parties and constituents were scarce and shallow. All parties shared the same pattern of activity, although there were some differences in the frequencies of use. Additionally, although user commitment increased over time, there were relatively few users who chose to follow/friend the political parties, suggesting that the large majority of the voters could not easily be reached through these platforms. In essence, the results indicate that social media as a political public relations tool is, so far, dwarfed by more traditional and analogue approaches.

INTRODUCTION

Media institutions have long been crucial in public relations, conveying more or less distorted messages between organizations and interested publics. Scholars have noted that a changing media landscape offers new opportunities, allowing organizations to bypass established media and communicate directly with important publics (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Negrine & Papathanassopoulos, 2011). This is of especial relevance in the political sphere where it is suggested that the Internet and social media help political actors to rely less on sound bites and horserace-fixated news media (Hallin, 1992; Iyengar, Norpoth, & Hahn, 2004; Negrine, & Papathanassopoulos, 2011).

This development becomes highly interesting in political public relations when considering the theory of relationship management, and makes the key argument that, in order for an organization to be successful, it needs to put more effort into creating and nurturing relations with important publics through, for example, long term commitment and reciprocity (Ledingham, 2006). The advent of social media makes it possible for political parties to engage with constituents on their own terms. It may look like a perfect match but the argument presupposes that the public is willing to commit to these social media and that the political parties utilize the potential.

Against this background, the overall purpose of the present study is to investigate how political parties utilize social media in relationship management using the Swedish election in 2010 as a case study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review consists of two sections. First, we place the study in a general theoretical context of political communication, media, and digitalization. Second, we consider how specific properties in digital media (i.e. Web 1.0 and 2.0) relate to certain dimensions of relationship management and political public relations.

Political communication, media, and digitalization

Communication between political parties and citizens has traditionally taken the form of one-way and one-to-many, with parties delivering a strategic elaborated message to potential voters (Chadwick, 2006; Xifra, 2010). In the context of news media, political messages are always conditioned by (news) media logic and the “mediatization” of politics, where the media has become the dominant form of public political communication. While an alternative still exists outside the media, political actors who want to achieve policy goals have to turn to the media to become visible and reach out to citizens (Asp & Esaiasson, 1996; Iyengar & McGrady, 2007; Strömbäck & Esser, 2009).

In the era of the network society (Castells, 1996), neither political debate nor political action has an obvious center, whether in parliament, certain political parties, or the mass media. Digitalization has fundamentally shaken the public arena previously controlled by media organizations that has now lost its “monopoly” as host presiding over the (political) public sphere both as an advertising and editorial space (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Negrine & Papathanassopoulos, 2011). Consequently, political parties, NGOs, interest groups, and citizens can establish and manage their own arenas of public political communication independent of journalistic involvement.

Social media presents new opportunities but also risks for political actors. The moment they start using social media they enter an implicit communicative agreement with the public; they are expected to seek reciprocity and interaction and not, as they traditionally have done, prioritize the internal party organization, members, supporters, and the media, instead of the public (Gurevitch, Coleman & Blumler, 2009).

Research is divided as regards to who will benefit from using the Internet. On the one hand, it can be argued that smaller political actors will have a greater chance to reach voters as they have greater difficulty gaining media access (Norris, 2003). On the other hand, research has shown that the bigger actors are more visible on the Web, indicating that resources also affect Internet presence (Gibson, Margolis, Resnick & Ward, 2003; Gibson & Ward, 2002).

The obvious and most symbolic example of the new possibilities is, of course, the Obama approach and the story of his success in making use of Web 2.0 strategies on the road to becoming the President of the USA. Some analysts attribute his victory to his employment of online strategies (Williams & Gulati, 2008). The explicit significance of the Obama strategies for the outcome of the election has been – and will surely continue to be – a theme in scholarly debates, but it is difficult not to see the similarities between claims about social media’s (Web 2.0) impact on the campaign and the claims made about the

Internet's transformational change of citizenry (in its Web 1.0 phase) in the 1990s (c.f., Dahlgren & Olsson, 2010).

New media technologies have previously emerged together with high hopes for democratic promise and political renewal, and much of the earlier research has incorporated something of a theoretical bias, where the potential of the Internet has often been emphasized in the light of conceptual, and sometimes speculative, analyses of digital characteristics. Thus, technology's "affordances" (Gibson, 1977; Hutchby, 2001) has been used as a point of departure for trying to estimate its *actual* implications. Simply put, claims are made that the development of communication technology challenges all relations in the political communications process and that the Internet breaks through traditional communication barriers, time and space, both horizontally between citizens and vertically between the authorities and citizens (McQuail, 2010). Attention has often been directed to the notion of interactivity, which has been considered to strengthen the possibility of a revitalization of the sphere of public politics (Bentivegna, 2006; Holmes, 1977). There are many different aspects of interactivity and in this study it is the *interactive exchange* between two social actors (political parties and users) that is the focus (McMillan, 2006). Empirical research from a variety of countries has shown that the communication strategies of political actors seem to take a "top-down" perspective and to avoid partly or entirely interaction with website users (Busqvist, 2010; Norris, 2003; Rommele, 2003; Vaagan, 2009).

Relationship management and digital political public relations

The overall change in the political sphere from one-way to two-way communication has similarities with theory development within public relations. Public relations as theory and practice have historically been associated with the publicity model and media management (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2006). The importance of two-way communication, enabled through digital media, has recently been stressed within public relations research especially concerning relationships and relationship management (Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 1997; Grunig et al., 2006; Kent & Taylor, 1998; Ledingham, 2006; Ledingham & Bruning, 2000a). Relationship management theory places emphasis on relationships rather than communication and the fact that the relationships should generate benefits for organizations and the public alike (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000b; Ledingham, 2006). Thus, in this framework, communicative actions are not interesting in isolation or to achieve short-term goals, but become so only in the context of the symmetry, intensity, content, frequency, valence, and duration of *exchange* between the political actor and its publics (Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 1997).

Although political public relations have been practiced for a long time, research – theoretical and empirical – is hard to find in public relations research (Strömbäck & Kioussis, 2011). Furthermore, previous research in political public relations has had a strong focus on the relationship between political actors and news media (Baines, 2011; Froehlich & Rudiger, 2006; Xifra, 2010), which is too narrow a scope in terms of studying all approaches through which political actors seek "... to influence and to establish, build and maintain beneficial relationships and reputations with its key publics..." (Strömbäck & Kioussis, 2011, p. 8). In particular, it is difficult to study the important and continuous

process of negotiation between politicians and voters (Xifra, 2010) by examining news media and media management.

Political communication is habitually divided into election and non-election periods with a clear focus on elections, arguably as it is at this point that the political future for the next term is decided and the political parties need to secure votes, rather than a genuine interest in listening to constituents in their capacity as citizens (Baines, 2011; Rommele, 2003; Strömbäck & Kioussis, 2011; Xifra, 2010). Relationship management theory suggests that a sole or too narrow focus on election campaigning might not be the best way to manage the long-term relations with constituents as party loyalty is achieved over time (Jo & Kim, 2003; Ledingham, 2001).

Related to this, in their effort to bridge public relations and political communication and the definition of political public relations, Strömbäck and Kioussis (2011) view relationship management as a key element:

“Political public relations is the management process by which an organization or individual actor for political purposes, through purposeful communication and action, *seeks to influence and to establish, build and maintain beneficial relationships* [emphasis added] and reputations with its key publics to help support its mission and achieve its goals”. (Strömbäck & Kioussis, 2011, p. 8)

The above definition highlights the fact that the quality of relationships is related to a reciprocal process involving both political actors and their publics that is taking place over time. Furthermore, this is a management process carried out by an actor to achieve its goals. In view of recent media developments, discussed above, relationship management has become easier in practice in relation to at least two dimensions – reciprocity and long-term commitment. Different terms are used in the literature to describe the two-way communication between an actor and its stakeholders. We have adapted reciprocity in this study since it emphasizes the cooperation, collaboration, and coordination (Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 1997) made available in digital media through interactive exchange (McMillan, 2006) between the organization and its publics. Thus, in this study, the working definition of reciprocity is the exchange between two actors (political parties and users) in a public arena (social media platforms). Research suggests that this kind of interaction strengthens the relationship between an organization and its publics (Jo & Kim, 2003; Kelleher, 2009; Kelleher & Miller, 2006).

Another important dimension in relationship management is long-term commitment between the organization and its publics (Ledingham, 2011). The low cost of digital media offers opportunities for political actors to maintain contact with important publics over time, even without the consent and/or intervention of news media (Baines, 2011; Jo & Kim, 2003; Ledingham, 2011). Research indicates that continuous communication through blogs has a positive effect on how publics perceive organizations (Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007) and that relationship building stems from trust and long-term cooperation (Jo & Kim, 2003).

Research on relationship management in digital political public relations is scarce (Ledingham, 2011; Strömbäck & Kioussis, 2011; Sweetser, 2011). Departing from a

relationship management perspective, then, this study seeks to contribute to the field of political public relations by investigating whether political parties take advantage of what digital media platforms offer in terms of long-term commitment and reciprocity.

The first goal of the study was to screen the presence of political parties on digital channels to see if there were any attempts at all to build relationships digitally. Accordingly, the first research question (RQ1) was: *What different digital platforms do the political parties utilize in their relationship building over time?*

The Internet does not have an obvious start, middle, or end. Arguably, in an information-overloaded milieu, it is important to link an organization's different media platforms to each other in order to help publics maneuver in an environment where it is not always easy to find and separate the counterfeit from the real. Furthermore, it is the website, the digital platform with the longest history, which is the organization's main digital hub. Consequently, the second research question (RQ2) was: *How do political parties promote their social media presence on their websites over time?*

In relationship building long-term commitment is crucial. Thus, the third research question (RQ3) was: *What are the levels of activity on the political parties' different digital platforms before, during, and after an election?*

Another important dimension in relationship building is reciprocity, afforded in this context by digital media, between an organization and its publics. Accordingly, the fourth and fifth research questions (RQ4 and RQ5) were: *To what extent do the political parties afford interactive features (i.e. features that allow for reciprocity) over time? And: To what extent and in what form do official representatives from the political parties (i.e., channel owners and/or identified politicians) engage in dialogue with users over time?*

Since relationships are a dual process, commitment must not only come from parties but also from their publics. One way to measure this commitment is to see how they choose to connect themselves publicly (i.e., follow Twitter feeds or become Facebook friends). Consequently, our sixth and final research question (RQ6) was: *How does the commitment of publics to the digital platforms of political parties evolve over time?*

METHOD

This study is situated within the Swedish political context. Sweden, a formal monarchy situated in the northern part of Europe, had just over 7 million citizens eligible to vote at the time of the national election to Parliament in 2010 (Statistiska centralbyrån). Since a large proportion of the citizenry are connected to the Internet, this creates a potentially fertile ground for digital relationship management, making it an interesting case to study.

For the purpose of measuring the use of and activities in social media, the study employed quantitative content analysis, following Berelson's (1971) notion of an "... objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication" (p. 18), although we did not perform an actual analysis of content. Rather, the study utilized systematic observations of the presence or absence of communication and/or interaction, and of various properties in the different channels (media platforms), such as the types of

options for interactive exchange (e.g. comments) that are afforded. On the Facebook pages of the parties we measured, amongst other things, the number of postings over a period of seven days, if it were possible to comment on the posts, and if the users were allowed to add posts to the page.

The national elections of 2010 were held on 19 September 2010. In order to study various aspects of relationship management over time, a longitudinal study was conducted, spanning 18 months, comprising of nine occasions before, during, and after the election. In the tables below, the date of each occasion is noted.

Taking into consideration the fact that political activity (in both directions) does not happen at just one moment in time, each occasion measured the activity on each platform over a period of seven days.

As noted above, the study included nine occasions for ten parties, yielding a total of 90 cases (N=90). The parties included in the study are described in Table 1.

Table 1 Parties included in the study, orientation, when founded, and votes in the 2006 Parliamentary election

#	Party ⁴	Orientation	Founded	Votes in 2006 election (%)
1	Moderaterna (M)	Liberal/Conservative	1904	26.3
2	Kristdemokraterna (KD)	Conservative	1964	6.6
3	Folkpartiet (Fp)	Liberal	1934	7.5
4	Centerpartiet (C)	Liberal	1910/1957 ¹	7.9
5	Socialdemokraterna (S)	Labour party, left	1889	35
6	Vänsterpartiet (V)	Socialist, left-wing	1917/1990 ²	5.6
7	Miljöpartiet (MP)	Green	1981	5.2
8	Sverigedemokraterna (SD)	Nationalist, right-wing	1988	2.9
9	Piratpartiet (PiP)	Issue oriented, liberal	2006	7.1 ³
10	Feministiskt initiativ (Fi)	Feminist	2005	2.2 ³

Notes:

¹ The first campaign to start an agrarian party was launched in 1910. "Centerpartiet" has been the name of the party since 1957.

² The party was first founded under the name Sveriges socialdemokratiska vänsterparti and has undergone a number of name changes since then. In 1990 the current name, Vänsterpartiet, was adopted.

³ Percentage in the 2009 EU Parliamentary election. The source for the results of elections is the Swedish Election Authority (http://www.val.se/tidigare_val/), 2011.

⁴ The letter(s) within parenthesis is the abbreviation used in Figures 1-3 below.

Table 1 gives an overview of the parties included in the study, with focus on their respective political orientation, when they were founded, and their votes in the national election to Parliament in 2006 (for parties 1–8).

Prior to the 2010 national election, parties 1 to 7 were in Parliament, thus making them rather self-evident to include. However, parties 8 to 10 were included in the study because (1) they were candidates for the 2010 national election, and (2) they achieved at least 2% of the votes in the election for the EU Parliament in 2009. The only exception is Sverigedemokraterna, who were included due to their high ratings in the pre-election polls

as well as their candidature in the 2010 election and, as it turned out, their election to the Parliament.

Before deciding which social media platforms to include in the study, an investigation into the use of social media by the parties was conducted. Each account on social media found in connection to one or several of the parties was then included in the study. As a result of the initial research, the social media platforms included in the study were Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, blogs (party/party leader blogs), and Flickr. For the majority of the parties, the “accounts” that were registered in the study had the party as the sender. However, there were some exceptions, notably Kristdemokraterna and Feministiskt Initiativ, who used the Twitter account of the respective party leader.

For the study a code sheet with a total of 42 variables (not all reported here) was constructed. Examples of variables were:

- *Does the homepage link to social media?*
- *Number of news updates in the last seven days.*
- *Does the party have a Facebook page?*

“Activity” and “reciprocity” were measured by the amount of activity in the seven days prior to each data gathering, and responses from the party organization, for example, to comments during the same period. The code sheet was complemented with an inductive approach in which the coders noted qualitatively the nature of the exchange between the political parties and the users.

Three coders were used in the study and before the first analysis was conducted (January 2010) the code sheet was tested and revised five times in order to achieve high inter-coder reliability (at the final re-iteration a Holsti-test yielded a satisfactory 0.97 score).

Methodological challenges

In the world of the Web and social media, eighteen months is quite a long period of time, and the dynamics of the Web, as noted by Karlsson & Strömbäck (2010), for example, present challenges to anyone wanting to capture and study it. The challenges for the present study may be summarized according to the following themes:

- *The parties’ changed platforms*
During the time period, some of the parties changed their Facebook pages, launched special campaign sites close to the election and suchlike. This posed a challenge in terms of what was to be evaluated as the official party website for example.
- *Changes in website structure and layout*
Some of the parties made drastic changes to their websites prior to the election. For example, the Green Party replaced their previous news bulletins on their website with embedded Facebook status updates, which posed questions as to how to code the *number of news updates on the party website in the last seven days*.
- *Changes in the social media platforms*
Functionality in the social media platforms is in constant flux. Features are added

and replaced continuously, making coding for *interactive features* (e.g. the ability to comment on and share content) somewhat difficult, to say the least.

To cope with the challenges, thorough notes, as well as screenshots, were recorded at each point of measurement. Important changes will be discussed as the results of the study are presented in the following section.

RESULTS

Presence in social media

A crucial issue is whether the parties have presence in social media platforms and thus RQ1 asked: *What different digital platforms do the political parties utilize in their relationship building over time?* Table 2 shows the extent to which the parties actually used social media in terms of whether they had an official page/channel at each date of measurement.

Table 2 Extent to which parties use social media platforms (N out of 10)

	Facebook	Twitter	YouTube	Party blog	Flickr	Sum
<u>2010-01-15</u>	10	10	10	4	7	41
<u>2010-04-16</u>	10	10	10	5	8	43
<u>2010-07-02</u>	10	10	10	4	8	42
<u>2010-09-03</u>	10	10	10	4	7	41
<u>2010-09-17</u>	10	10	10	4	7	41
<u>2010-10-01</u>	10	10	10	3	8	41
<u>2010-12-17</u>	10	10	10	2	8	40
<u>2011-03-11</u>	10	10	10	2	8	40
<u>2011-06-10</u>	10	10	10	2	8	40

Comment: The occasion prior to the election have been underlined in this and following tables.

As Table 2 shows, all the parties had official pages/channels on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube during the whole study, demonstrating that these platforms can be used for long-term relationship management. Concerning party/party leader blogs, it became evident that although some of them had the infrastructure in place, the parties bowed out immediately after the election. On a methodological note, it is extremely difficult to appraise whether a social media channel is official or “mock” unless the political parties officially claim ownership or promote it on their website – this is not always the case.

Promotion of social media platforms

Having a registered account that can be found by someone searching the Web is one thing, but actually promoting the page/channel on the party website is another.

Consequently, RQ2 asked: *How do political parties promote their social media presence on their websites over time?* The parties employed different strategies on whether or not to promote the digital platforms on their websites and Table 3 shows which social media platforms the parties were linked to from their respective websites at each date of measurement.

Table 3 Links to social media platforms on party websites (N out of 10)

	Facebook	Twitter	YouTube	Party blog	Flickr	Sum
2010-01-15	5	4	5	6	3	23
2010-04-16	7	7	5	7	3	29
2010-07-02	6	8	4	6	3	27
2010-09-03	8	7	10	5	4	34
2010-09-17	8	8	10	4	4	34
2010-10-01	7	7	9	4	5	32
2010-12-17	10	8	7	3	6	34
2011-03-11	10	9	7	3	7	36
2011-06-10	9	8	7	3	6	33

Comment: The table shows how many parties (out of 10) are linked to the respective social media platform on the occasions of measurement.

As noted in Table 3, it was not self-evident for the parties to link to social media platforms, although they had a presence as demonstrated in Table 2. The linking practice increased as the election neared while fluctuating after it but never dropping to the pre-election numbers. An interesting observation is that YouTube was the only platform to which all political parties linked at the time of election (but not after), which might indicate that this is a channel in which the parties have much faith when it comes to spreading their messages, for example, with campaign videos.

Activity on the platforms

Having a registered account on a certain social media platform does not necessarily imply usage of that account and since long-term commitment is a key issue in relationship management RQ3 asked: *What are the levels of activity on the political parties' different digital platforms before, during, and after an election?* Table 4 shows the mean number of updates for each media outlet during the time of the study.

Table 4 Mean number of updates on specific media outlets over time (N)

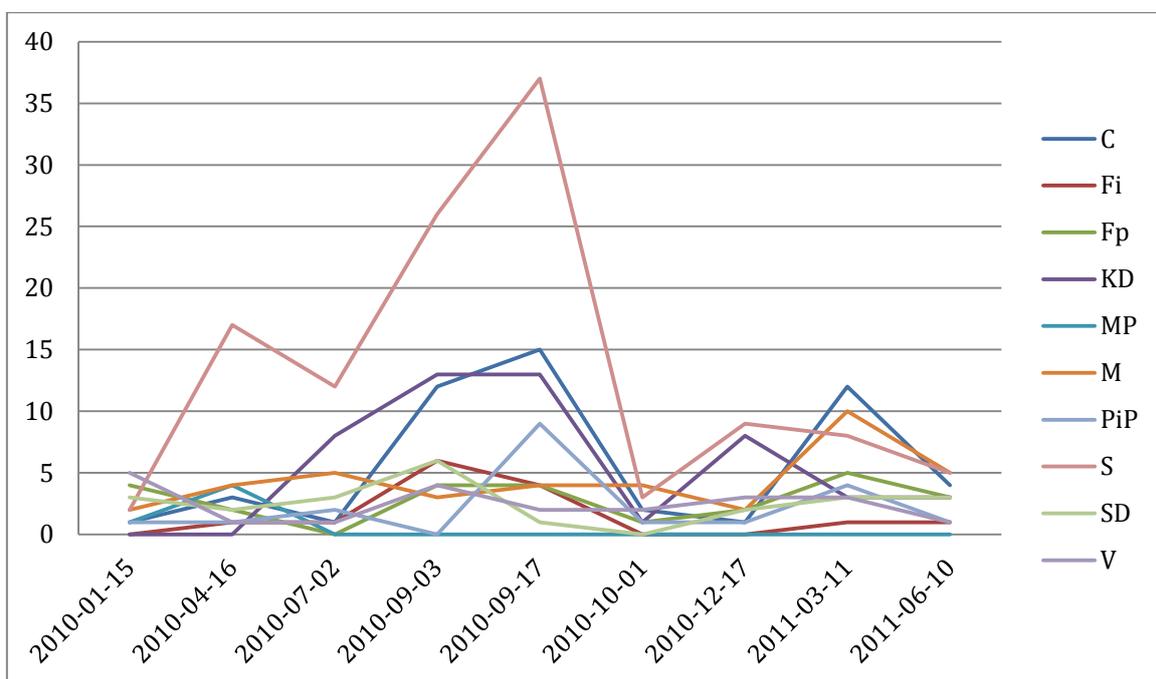
	Web	Facebook	Twitter	YouTube	Blog	Flickr	Sum
2010-01-15	2	6	25	0	0	0	33
2010-04-16	4	12	21	1	1	1	40
2010-07-02	3	9	15	1	1	0	29
2010-09-03	7	31	74	7	7	47	173
2010-09-17	9	51	87	4	4	36	191
2010-10-01	1	11	17	0	0	0	29
2010-12-17	3	9	18	1	0	0	31
2011-03-11	5	18	23	1	0	1	48
2011-06-10	3	9	12	1	0	0	25

Comment: "Web" refers to the official party website. The Sum column summarizes the mean number of updates for all the platforms.

For all outlets, as shown in Table 4, it is clear that updates were concentrated around the time just before the election in September 2010 and then a large drop in activity was seen

on October 1 2010, just two weeks after the election. However, for YouTube, party blogs, and Flickr this pattern is even more striking. For example, for Flickr there was practically no activity except for the two dates just prior to the election. There was a relatively big increase, visible in Table 4 (above) and Figures 1–3 (below), at the March 2011 measuring point, which probably relates to the fact that the biggest opposition party, Socialdemokraterna, had an internal election deciding who would be the new chairman; this created a stir in Swedish political life. It is also quite clear from the results so far that the three preferred media outlets were the party website, Facebook, and Twitter. In what follows, the focus will be on these outlets. To begin with, Figure 1 shows news updates on the party websites over time.

Figure 1 News updates over a seven-day period on party websites. Each line represents a specific party (N)

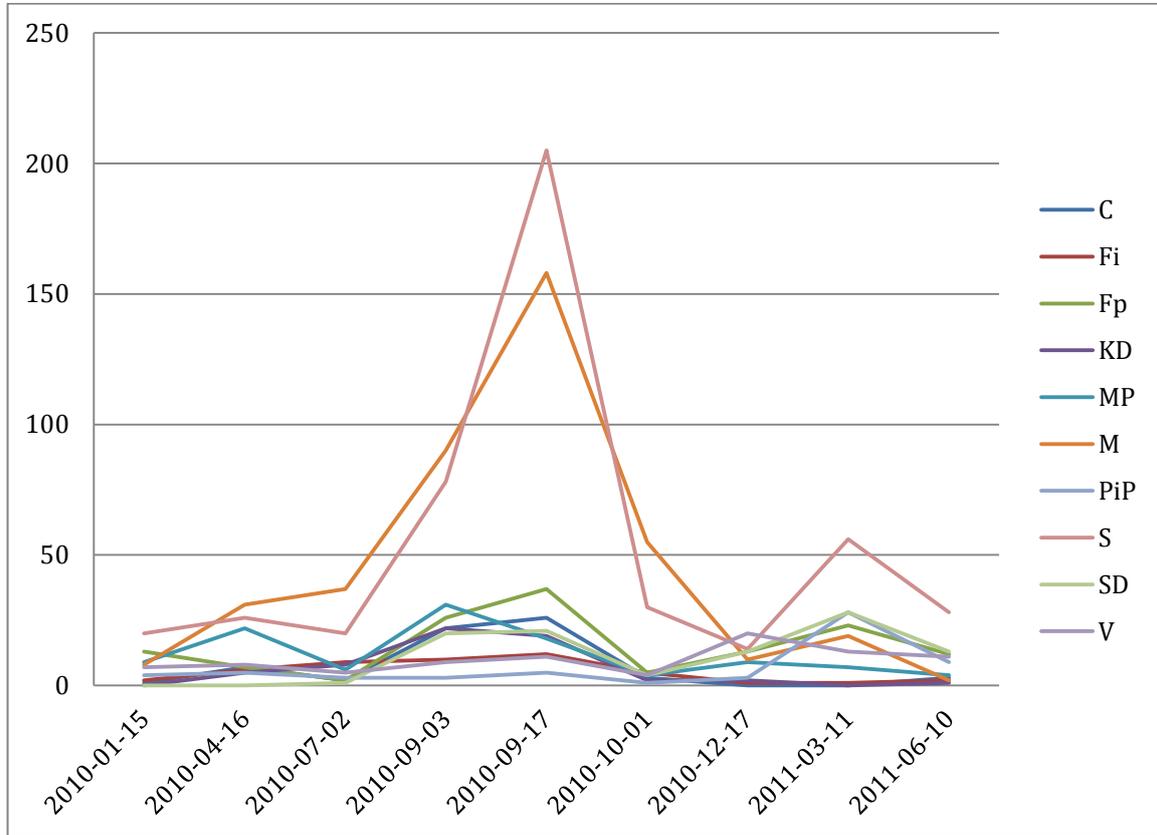


Comment: Each line represents a specific party (N). Election day is 2010-09-17

Looking at Figure 1, we can see a peak in the activity just around the time of the election. However, Socialdemokraterna had a remarkably higher number of updates than other parties. On September 17, two days before the election, Socialdemokraterna had 37 updates in the last seven days, followed by Centerpartiet with 15 updates, and then Kristdemokraterna with 13 updates. The rest of the parties had less than 10 updates. Furthermore, we can see that Socialdemokraterna increased their activity from April 2010 onwards only to decrease drastically their activity just after the election, in concert with other parties. It is also important to note that for Miljöpartiet the number of updates was 0 from September 3 2010 due to the fact that they changed their website so that it embedded the feed from Facebook. Since this feed is measured in a variable of its own, the decision was made to set the “news updates on the web over the last seven days” to zero.

One of the most frequently used platforms by the parties was Facebook and Figure 2 illustrates the updates over time.

Figure 2 Updates over a seven-day period on party Facebook pages (N)

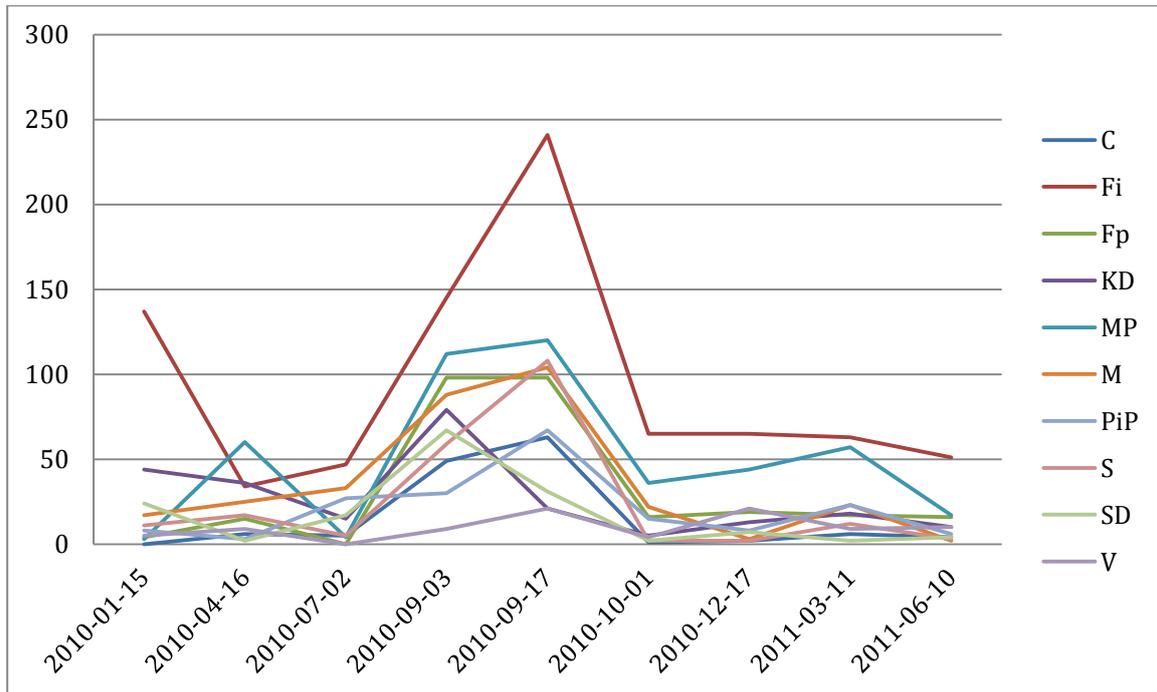


Comment: Each line represents a specific party (N). Election day is 2010-09-17

Once again the pattern is clear. The Facebook activity for all parties peaked just before the election. Moderaterna and Socialdemokraterna were the two parties with the highest number of updates, peaking at a little over 200 updates (Socialdemokraterna) and almost 160 (Moderaterna) respectively two days prior to the election.

The third platform most used was Twitter and, as illustrated in Figure 3, the pattern of activity was quite similar to those in Figures 1 and 2.

Figure 3 Updates over a seven-day period on party Twitter channels (N)



Comment: Each line represents a specific party (N). Election day is 2010-09-17

However, compared with Facebook, there was a change regarding the most active actors around the time of the election on this channel as Feministiskt initiativ and Miljöpartiet scored highest.

The general pattern is clear – the activity on the social media platforms was concentrated around the election. In total, 4,850 updates were made on the three most used platforms in our study and 54 percent of those were made in the two measuring points just before the election. In contrast, only 26 percent of the updates were made in the following nine months. It is also evident that the two largest parties, Moderaterna and Socialdemokraterna, were those with the highest frequencies of use on at least Facebook and the Web where their input made up over half the updates. The image changes when Twitter is considered and here Moderaterna and Socialdemokraterna together netted 30 percent of the updates, while Feministiskt Initiativ had close to 20 percent. Here, it can be argued that, on the one hand, small parties can be as active (or more) as large parties. On the other hand, it seems that Feministiskt initiativ and its party leader Gudryn Schyman is an exception. It should also be noted that Feministiskt Initiativ’s high level of activity on Twitter in January 2010 can be related to the fact that Gudryn Schyman figured in a formatted television program “Let’s Dance” at the time and that the party’s Twitter feed was her own.

Interaction with the users

A crucial component in relationship management is reciprocity and hence RQ4 asked: *To what extent do the political parties afford interactive features (i.e. features that allow for*

reciprocity) over time?¹; while RQ5 asked: *To what extent and in what form do official representatives from the political parties (i.e., channel owners and/or identified politicians) engage in dialogue with users over time?* Table 5 shows the overall use (from the perspective of the parties) of features for interactive exchange, and the extent to which the parties responded to various user inputs.

Table 5 Degree to which specific outlets afford interactive exchange and the degree to which parties commented on input from users (percent)

	Affords interactive exchange	Comments on user input
Web	29	3
Facebook	92	32
Twitter	n/a	45
YouTube	42	7
Blog	24	1
Flickr	22	0

Comment: The percentages in the left column were calculated by dividing the occurrence of features for interactive exchange by the number of cases in the study, i.e., 90. The same calculation was made for the right column, “comments on user input”, i.e., calculating on how many occasions, out of 90, input by the public was commented by the parties *at all*.

In order for any communication, or interaction, to take place, interactive exchange needs to be afforded by the different platforms. Table 5 illustrates the general picture, that although the parties made room for user input to some extent, Facebook being the most prominent example, when it came to engaging with the users/the public, the parties appeared somewhat reluctant. Concerning Table 5, it is important to stress that our measurement only recorded whether there was *any* possibility for users to have an input and that “comments on user input” relates to whether there was any response from the parties to user input *at all* during the different measuring periods. Thus, the actual number of individual user inputs that received no response is considerably higher.

Furthermore, our qualitative analysis of the nature of the political parties’ response to user comments indicates that the level of complexity in the interaction was rather low. We recorded interaction between parties and users in almost half of the measuring points on Twitter, while there was only one-way traffic on the other occasions. Twitter as a medium is restricted to 140 characters and does not in itself provide a particularly good infrastructure for in-depth political discourse. However, Twitter was the digital platform on which the most intense and frequent interaction between parties and users was recorded. In general, the interaction concerned: thanking for support; making political statements; answering questions; encouraging people to show up for political meetings; agreeing/disagreeing on issues.

¹ The different platforms offer different functions for interactivity. In some cases (e.g., YouTube and Facebook) it is possible to change the settings in order to limit this functionality. If any type of interactive exchange was afforded, this was coded “Yes”, otherwise it was coded “No”.

On the other platforms the interaction was less frequent and intense. Here, the interaction concerned technical support, political statements or redirections to where one could find more information on the party's policies on different issues.

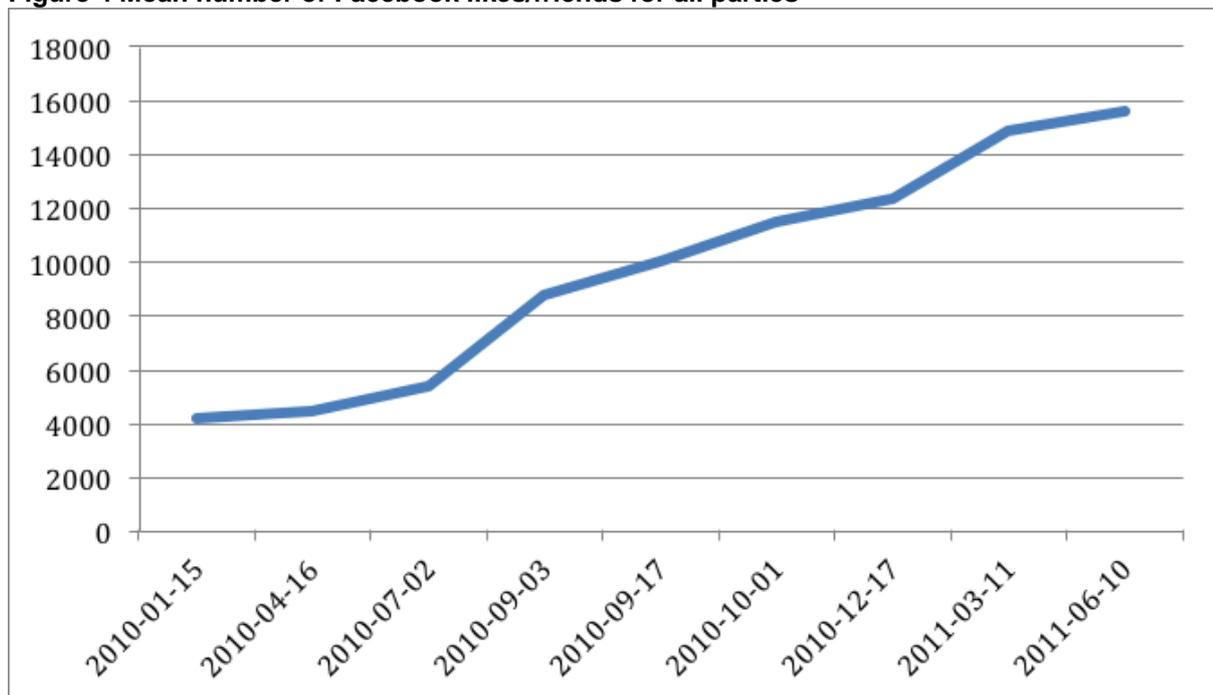
The different nature of the interactive exchange noted in the qualitative analysis may relate to the architecture of the communication patterns where tweets are between people, while communications on the other platforms are made "to whom it may concern".

Responding to initiatives in communication from the users in order to establish and maintain a relationship with them should, according to relationship management theory, be important to parties. However, our study shows that in their interaction with the users, parties followed the same pattern as that in their own level of activity. They seemed to be somewhat willing to answer questions and interact with the users up until the time of the election, but as soon as the constituents had cast their votes this interaction became less interesting.

Commitment from the public

Relationships are a dual process; commitment must not only come from parties but also from their publics. To investigate the publics' commitment our sixth and final research question was: *How does the commitment of publics to the digital platforms of political parties evolve over time?* Although the party activities decrease after the election (as shown in Figures 1-3), the image is quite different concerning user commitment to the political parties' social media outlets. In contrast to the parties' updates, the number of "friends/likes" (Facebook) and followers (Twitter) continued to increase after the election (see Figures 4-6 below).

Figure 4 Mean number of Facebook likes/friends for all parties



As noted in Figure 4, the pattern of likes/friends indicating commitment differed from that of party activities. Where the party activity in different channels decreased after the election, the commitment from the users continued to increase. We will return to this, but first we will take a closer look at Twitter, which shows the same pattern, as illustrated in Figure 5.

Figure 5 Mean number of followers on party Twitter channels

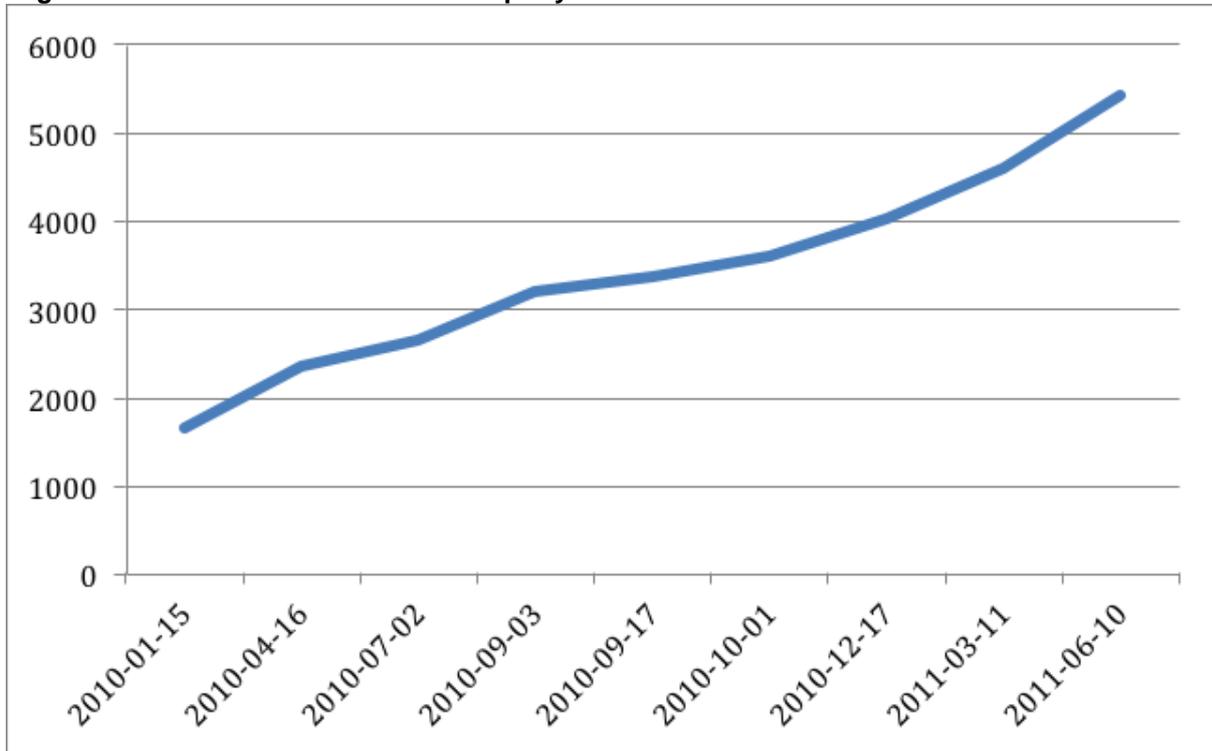
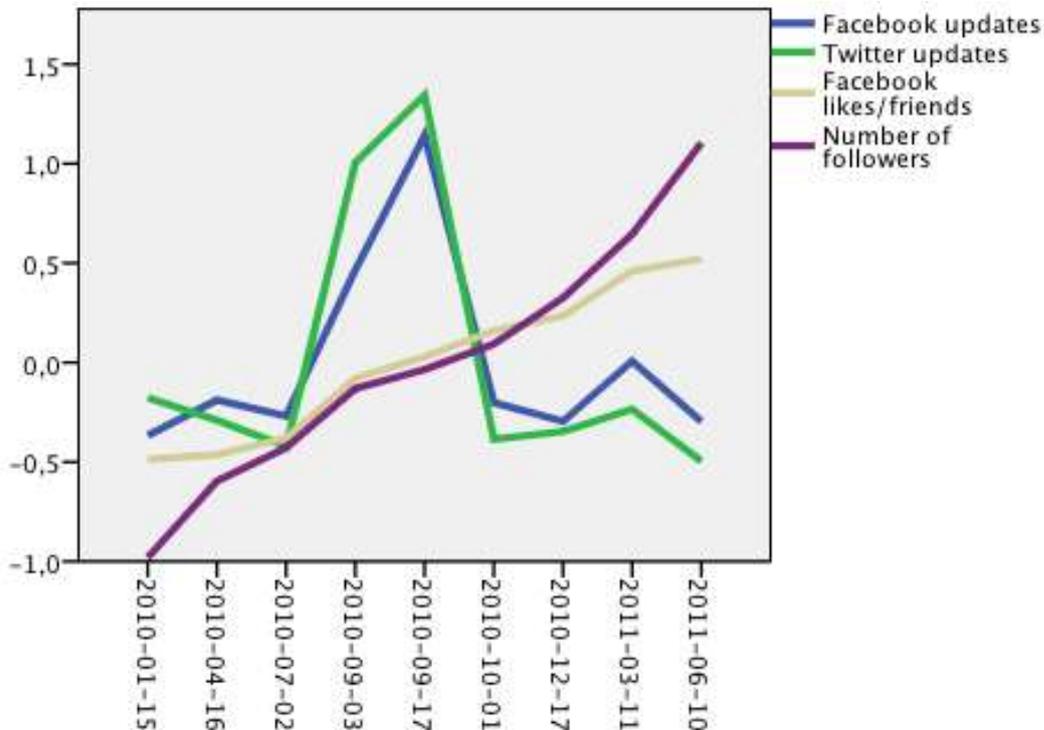


Figure 5 shows that the mean number of Twitter followers starts at a little more than 1500 in January 2010 and ends at more than 5000 in June 2011. When comparing the exact number of “likes” on Facebook with the number of followers on Twitter, it is evident that the parties in general reach more users on Facebook. The shares for the different parties are, however, different in the different channels. Two days before the election, Sverigedemokraterna had 36 percent of all “likes” on Facebook, followed by Piratpartiet with 20 percent. The two largest parties, Socialdemokraterna and Moderaterna, had 12 percent each. At the same point in time, Feministiskt Initiativ had 17 percent of all “followers” on Twitter, followed by Moderaterna with 13 percent. Thus, looking at “likes” and “followers”, it is not the largest parties that are at the top, rather it is the smaller parties that reach a larger proportion of the constituents through social media. Furthermore, there are some parties that are more successful in growing the number of friends (Sverigedemokraterna, Piratpartiet) or followers (Feministiskt Initiativ) than the others, but in general all parties grow the number of friends and followers. The exception is Feministiskt Initiativ on Facebook; it has slightly fewer friends after the 2010-10-01 measuring point (minus 4 percent at the end of our study). Thus, although Figures 4 and 5 show means, they still give an accurate image of the general trend.

Considering the continuous increase of likes (Facebook) and followers (Twitter) over time, it is clear that the public seeks to form relations with the parties before and after an

election – a commitment not matched by activities from the political parties. Figure 6 gives a good illustration of this.

Figure 6 Facebook and Twitter updates and Facebook 'likes' and Twitter followers over time



Comment: Mean values have been standardized to facilitate comparison of values on different scales.

There are two important caveats that need to be taken into account when looking at the curves in Figure 6. Firstly, the height of the peak in activity around the time of the election was to a great extent affected by the amount of activity from the largest parties, Moderaterna and Socialdemokraterna. Secondly, the level of commitment from users was largely affected by the greatly increased numbers of “likes” on Facebook that the two parties Sverigedemokraterna and Piratpartiet received during the time of the study. However, having taken these into consideration, Figure 6 still gives a largely representative depiction of the patterns of the parties’ activity and user commitment. It is evident that, in general, the parties are not in tune with user commitment.

DISCUSSION

Digital media offers unprecedented opportunities for political actors to create, nurture, maintain, and develop relations with constituents through long-term commitment and reciprocity on their own unfiltered media platforms (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Ledingham, 2011; Sweetser, 2011).

Yet, it is painstakingly clear that the reality, at least as far as Swedish political parties were concerned in the 2010 national elections, looks very different and that the patterns found in

this study have also been found in earlier studies. First, top-down appears to be the standard mode of communication, although there are some exceptions to this, especially on Twitter. Second, elections are at the center of communication patterns (Baines, 2011; Strömbäck & Kiousis, 2011; Xifra, 2010) as party activity is low until just before the election and decreasing immediately after. This is in terms of: how they market digital platforms on the website, how active they are on the platforms, and to what extent they reply to voters' input at all. It is rather evident, therefore, that communicating to (but not so much with) the voters is of greater importance as long as the voters have influence on the political parties' immediate futures. When the balance of political power has ultimately been decided, the parties are much less interested in both dialogue and monologue with the constituents. Third, and finally, size matters as the smallest parties, in general, have a hard time being as active as the larger ones. Thus, digital media does not seem to provide smaller political actors with opportunities, as it has been argued (Norris, 2003), but rather reflects the resources available (Gibson & Ward, 2002; Gibson et al., 2003). On the other hand, the smaller parties reach more constituents in relative, and sometimes absolute, terms; for this reason, the digital platforms are more important to them.

Additionally, all parties have websites and a presence in social media and their infrastructure is up and running well before and after an election. Some digital media are deemed more important than others and this can be seen in the fact that the parties used Facebook and Twitter the most. Although the other platforms were used to some extent, this was predominantly restricted to the days prior to the election, with them serving a complementary role.

Another observation is that the political parties do not utilize one digital platform (i.e., website) to promote other digital platforms (i.e., social media channels), although they are active on them, suggesting a lack of strategy on how to coordinate their communicative activities.

User commitment to these platforms increases even after the election is long over, while the activity of the political parties decreases sharply. The political parties in this study opted out of the interactive and long-term commitment potential of the digital medium to strengthen their relationships with publics, which earlier research on relationship management has demonstrated to be successful (Kelleher & Miller, 2006). However, it seems that user commitment to the political parties' social media as a whole is rather low. Of the 7 million Swedes who have an Internet connection and the opportunity to vote, only a fraction (the most generous estimation would still arrive at less than two percent) chose to subscribe to these media channels, suggesting that traditional political public relations is still more important, not only to the parties but also to the voters.

This raises the question of whether digital media is, so far, overestimated as a relationship management tool in political public relations despite considerable attention from theorists. However, there are also tangible ramifications for practice to be drawn from this study. Relationship building contains a distinct management dimension in which the organization's mission and goals should be achieved (Strömbäck & Kiousis, 2011). The findings from this study suggest that the management dimension is lacking concerning how these social media channels could be used both as singular tools and as an integrated part of an overall long-term communication strategy. Thus, here lies an

opportunity and a role for the public relations practitioner to help the political parties to develop a strategy for relationship building on digital platforms that embraces the potential for both dialogue and continuity. Continuity is especially important since the interest from the public extends well beyond the election period.

However, the most important finding from this study suggests that while digital media do indeed afford relationship building with a growing number of constituents, they cannot be seen as a key tool for political public relations. Rather, they are a complementary means – and perhaps not even a strong alternative to other traditional ways – of reaching out to the public. Relationship building in this environment must be seen as having rather insignificant importance for the time being. Thus, it might be a wiser choice for the public relations practitioner to advise political actors to channel considerably more resources to “analogue” activities such as media management, advertising, door knocking, and political meetings.

Although it not possible to detect this through content analysis, digital platforms may be a way to reach journalists and opinion leaders who, in turn, affect the wider public. However, that scenario has more resemblance with the analogue media system of reaching constituents through agents, which negates the whole idea of authentic and direct relationship building between political organizations and voters via digital media.

LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

This study was limited to one country, did not consider party or voter perspectives, and involved a rather schematic content analysis. Further research might study whether these patterns are repeated at different times and in different contexts. Another suggestion is to study both the political actors and voters: who they are, how they perceive, and what they expect from forming relationships in digital media, especially in view of the limited interest citizens showed to committing themselves to the platforms. In particular, it could be fruitful to investigate the relation between citizens’ use of social media in a political context with, for instance, party loyalty, political engagement, and voter turnout, to see whether there is an actual effect of the relationship building efforts.

The measurement used in this study (friending/liking) for citizen commitment to the political parties’ digital platforms is a crude one and further investigations into other and more qualitative dimensions of citizen commitment are encouraged. It would also be interesting to analyze, in depth, contributions made on these platforms to determine the nature of the interactions. Finally, it would also be interesting to evaluate the role of digital media in relation to the broader political communication ecology.

Although limited, this study has four related contributions. First, in a research area dominated by an Anglo-Saxon focus, the Swedish context offers an alternative context for further theory building. Second, it investigated the infrastructure of digital political public relations and how a large number of political actors utilize this. Third, it proposed and carried out a longitudinal research design explicitly created to analyze the reciprocal and long-term commitment dimensions of relationship management. Finally, and most importantly, the study indicates that digital media make little difference in political public

relations, thus highlighting the importance of more traditional approaches both in research and practice.

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