

Shouting to empty walls? A Micro-level Perspective to Communicative Functions in the Social interaction Between the Candidates and the Constituents during Parliamentary Election Campaigning

Mari Tuokko*

Department of Communication, University of Jyväskylä; Helsinki Institute for Information Technology HIIT and Department of Computer Science, Aalto University and University of Helsinki,

Salla-Maaria Laaksonen

Communication Research Centre, University of Helsinki

Matti Nelimarkka

Helsinki Institute for Information Technology HIIT and Department of Computer Science, Aalto University and University of Helsinki

Tarja Valkonen

Department of Communication, University of Jyväskylä

*) Corresponding author: Mari Tuokko, Vapaudenkatu 57 a21, 40100 Jyväskylä, +358 50 364 7507, mari.tuokko@gmail.com

Mari Tuokko (Master of Arts) is a graduate from the Department of Communications, discipline of Speech Communication in the University of Jyväskylä. She is interested in interaction processes and communicative behavior in organizational settings and technology-mediated communication, especially social media.

Salla-Maaria Laaksonen (M.Soc.Sc) is a doctoral candidate at the Department of Social Research, discipline of Media and Communication studies in the University of Helsinki. Her doctoral dissertation focuses on how corporate reputations are narrated in digital public spaces.

Matti Nelimarkka (M.Soc.Sc, BS) is a doctoral candidate at the Department of Computer Science in University of Helsinki and researcher at Helsinki Institute for Information Technology HIIT and Department of Computer Science at Aalto University. His research examines online participation, education at scale and computational techniques for social science.

Tarja Valkonen (Ph.D.) is a senior lecturer in Speech Communication at the Department of Communication in the University of Jyväskylä. Her research focuses on interpersonal communication competence, especially at knowledge-based work and virtual teaming.

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Abstract

This study looks at online political conversations during the 2015 Parliamentary Election in Finland. Using interaction analysis as a research method, this study asks what kinds of communicative functions arise in Twitter and Facebook conversation threads between the candidates and constituents. The conversation threads were selected from a data set of 700 000 messages collected using automated tools for social media data gathering. The results of the article show that the social interaction between the constituents and the candidates in social media during election campaign largely comprises on stating and asking for opinions or sharing and searching for information. The participants also share personal information, critique and argue, and praise and show support to the candidates. The study provides evidence that the candidates and the constituents have meaningful and insightful conversations where they distribute information, share ideas and reflect on each others' opinions and thoughts. Campaign-related functions such as broadcasting and mobilizing do not dominate the conversations. Further, the results indicate differences in discussions on Facebook and on Twitter. The conversations were more reciprocal on Twitter than on Facebook, and also opinions and information were exchanged more actively in Twitter conversations. Conversations on Facebook were more often campaign-related and a positive tone prevailed in the discussions. Twitter, however, emerged as an arena for debates and conversations, some of which held a critical tone.

Keywords: electoral campaigning, communicative functions, politicians, social interaction, social media

Introduction

During recent years, various social media services have become an important forum for political campaigning. Research indicates that candidates indeed have multiple reasons to be present in social media during electoral campaigning. Social media is an effective channel to activate the voters, to discuss with the citizens, to share information and political views (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2012; Wattal, Schuff, Mandviwalla, & Williams, 2010) as well as to collect campaign funding (Kreiss, 2015, p. 131). Hence, social media seems to be a channel, which enhances the efficiency of political campaigning through the interaction functions it offers, and this effect is directly reflected to the election outcomes (Gainous & Wagner, 2014; Lee & Shin, 2012; Utz, 2009). However, during the first years of adoption of social media services, candidates, parties, and other political actors did not fully appropriate interactivity. More interactive patterns of use have developed lately, as political actors seem to slowly acknowledge and adopt the participatory aspects of social media (e.g., Enli & Skogerbø, 2013; Larsson, 2015; Schweitzer, 2011).

In general, many researchers of electoral campaigning emphasize the interaction aspects of campaigning be it online or offline. For example, Trent and Friedenberg (2007) mention interpersonal interaction as a crucial part of political campaigning. Borg and Morning (2005, p. 47), in a similar vein, define electoral campaigning as a multilayered, interactive series of events, where candidates and voters meet. Hence, electoral campaigning is essentially an interactive process: the goals cannot be reached unless the candidate engages in interaction with the citizens. Due to the inherited interactivity of social media platforms both researchers and politicians have placed hopes upon social media services to create a new, interactive arena for politicians and constituents to communicate and for a place to conduct campaign work.

Despite the abundance of research on politicians on social media there is a lack of understanding of the actual campaigning practices taking place on the micro level (e.g., Graham, Jackson, & Broersma, 2014). Majority of the existing research has focused on political campaigning (Lilleker, Tenscher, & Štětka, 2015; Utz, 2009), and candidates' social networks (D'heer & Verdegem, 2014) as well as the forms (Larsson & Ihlen, 2015) and quantity of engagement with citizens (Grant, Moon, & Grant, 2010). However, the contents and practices of interpersonal online communication and interaction between the candidates and the constituents has not been widely studied.

In this paper we study the range of communicative functions used when candidates and the constituents have conversations in social media during the campaigning for the parliamentary elections 2015 in Finland. In the study social interaction is perceived as functional behavior, where the participants pursue certain communicative goals and ambitions. The underlying assumption is that people communicate with each other in order to pursue certain social functions or goals (Bryant, Marmo, & Ramirez Jr, 2011; Burleson, 2010; Canary, Cody, & Manusov, 2008).

By investigating the conversations between candidates and citizens on Facebook and on Twitter during the campaigning period of the 2015 election, this study focuses on the micro-level communication practices pursued by the candidates. Previous research on the functions of candidates' political messages during campaign period exists to some extent (see e.g., Graham, Broersma, Hazelhoff, & van 't Haar, 2013; Graham et al., 2014). However,

most of the existing research on functions of political messages focuses solely on the messages sent by the candidates. This study takes a different perspective compared to the previous research as it looks at the communicative functions in the context of conversation threads including the messages of the constituents as well.

This paper proceeds as follows. First, we discuss social media from the perspective of social interaction in the context of politics and election. Next, we present our data collection strategy and the methodological framework used in the study. Then, the results of the interaction analysis are presented and discussed, and the limitations of the study described prior presenting our conclusions.

Social media and interpersonal communication between the candidates and the citizens

Studies on online campaigning have examined how online media is utilized for interpersonal interaction between the candidates and the citizens starting from websites (Gibson & Ward, 2000; Stromer-Galley, 2000). To summarize the findings from these studies, the view is rather pessimistic towards “true” interaction between the candidates and the citizens (e.g., Graham et al., 2013; Ross, Fountaine, & Comrie, 2014; Sweetser & Lariscy, 2008). From politicians perspective, several studies suggest that politicians use social media to broadcast views than to engage conversations with citizens (e.g., Graham et al., 2013). It has been found that politicians do not actively invite dialogue with readers of their posts, and rarely get involved in comment threads or conversations (Ross et al., 2014; Sweetser & Lariscy, 2008). It seems that politicians have the tendency to describe their motivation to converse with the citizens much higher than what happens in reality (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013; Ross et al., 2014, p. 266). Stromer-Galley (2000) suggested that candidates avoided online interaction, as it burdensome and leads to lack of both control of the campaign message as well as ambiguity as online media is traceable. Naturally, as Graham et al. (2013) argue, the level of interaction should be considered in the frames of the existing mediascape. Even if the observed amount of interaction in social media is rather low (26%), it is misleading to compare interactivity levels with other forms of media since they don't enable social interaction in the same way.

Even though most studies on politicians' use of social media have largely found that a one-way broadcasting rationale seems to be the norm, some recent research suggests that we might be witnessing a slow shift in how political actors engage in online interaction. Looking at the online engagement during campaigning, Grant et al. (2010) found that Twitter is increasingly becoming the political space in which ideas, issues and policies are discussed and debated between politicians and the citizen. Also Larsson (2015) found that in the recent elections party leaders were using the mention (@username) functionality in Twitter more frequently than before, especially to engage in communication with citizens. Similarly Enli and Skogerbø (2013) found that in the Norwegian election campaigns, Twitter was used more for continuous dialogue between the candidates and the electorate compared to Facebook. Further, interaction seems to be an effective campaigning strategy. Vaccari (2012) showed that indirect persuasion through interpersonal communication online can increase the probability of message reception and acceptance by the citizens. It has also been suggested that the politicians who use social media to converse appear to gain more political benefit from the platform than others (Grant et al., 2010).

Another line of studies has focused on the citizens' perspective. Citizens have been suggested to use social media more to listen politicians than to send messages themselves (Grant et al., 2010). However, when citizens do interact, it seems that they engage selectively with campaign messages. Recent study shows that the citizens seem to often interact more with policy-oriented posts than with promotional ones (Gerodimos & Justinussen, 2014). The constituents seem also to engage in negative campaigning on Twitter more commonly than candidates. However, the negative tweets mostly compromise on emotions and opinions, which indicates that Twitter seems to be more as an outlet for expressing discontent than as a medium for negative campaigning for citizens (Hosch-Dayican, Amrit, Aarts, & Dassen, 2014). Previous research suggests that existing political knowledge and confidence (Warner, McGowen, & Hawthorne, 2012), higher education and higher socioeconomic background predict more active political engagement on social media (Blank, 2013). Therefore it's not surprising that the users that are politically active on social media have been found to engage in political activity offline as well (Vitak et al., 2011).

The forms of mediated social interaction

Previous research has suggested that people produce messages in social interaction in order to accomplish social goals or functions (Burleson, 2010, p. 155). Interpersonal communication always has certain objectives, which people are attempting to pursue while interacting with each other (Canary et al., 2008; Huotari, Hurme, & Valkonen, 2005). It has also been suggested that the social networking sites - such as Twitter and Facebook - serve important interpersonal and relational functions for their users (Bryant et al., 2011, p. 3-4). In this study, social interaction is perceived as *functional behavior*, which means that people communicate in order to pursuit certain functions or goals. Hence, the goals and functions that appear in social interaction are here referred to as communicative functions. Communicative functions can be defined and classified in several ways, and various typologies of communicative functions have been proposed by different researchers (see e.g. Bales, 1951; Bryant et al., 2011; Burleson, 2010; Canary et al., 2008).

Previous research on the functions of candidates' political messages during campaign period exists to some extent (see Graham et al., 2013, 2014). For example, Graham et al. (2013) showed how candidates use Twitter to broadcast content (update, promote, critique, disseminate information, and presenting stance) as well as interacting with citizens (debate or take position, giving acknowledgments, organizing or mobilizing, giving advices, and consulting citizens). Most of the existing research on functions of political messages focuses solely on the messages sent by the candidates.

This study takes a different perspective compared to the previous research as it looks at the communicative functions in the context of conversation threads including the messages of the constituents as well, and asks

RQ1 What kinds of communicative functions arise in Twitter and Facebook discussions between the candidates and constituents?

Mediated social interaction and media affordances

Above we have summarized how candidates have adopted social media as an interactive venue for their campaigning. We also discussed what type of interpersonal interaction

Table 1
Features of Facebook and Twitter for conversations

Feature	Facebook	Twitter
Contribution length	63,206 characters	140 characters
Contribution type	Text, photo, video	Text, photo, video
Reactions to contributions	Like/React, share, comment	Star, retweet, reply
Conversation	Threaded, single thread	Chained, multiple chains
Display of contributions	Curated through algorithms	Timeline

takes place during campaigning. As this interaction is mediated through platforms, researchers have lately examined how interactive features on different platforms are used (Graham et al., 2013). These interaction features create the interaction environment for participants. This environment is characterized by both technical and social aspects. Already Stromer-Galley (2004) suggested that interaction takes place in product (technical environments) but is facilitated by processes (social environment). More recently communication researchers have discussed the idea of affordances of technical environments (e.g., Gibbs, Rozaidi, & Eisenberg, 2013; Majchrzak, Faraj, Kane, & Azad, 2013; Stanfill, 2015; Vaast & Kaganer, 2013). An *affordance* refers to the potential actions a system provides to the user. For example, a social media platform may afford uploading new images—which thus allows users to apply those in their communication.

Based on the literature around media affordances and social interaction, we are interested if Facebook and Twitter facilitate different types of social interaction between candidates and citizens. As we can see on Table 1, Facebook and Twitter provide different type of affordances for conversations, in particular the length of the comments and the type of conversation. The differences can also be caused by social factors, as in Finland the user penetration of Facebook is significantly higher than the penetration of Twitter Mättö (2015). Formally, our second research question is

RQ2 How are the affordances of Facebook and Twitter connected to the communicative functions in conversations?

Data and Method

We adopted the functional communication approach to better understand the practices taking place within the online political conversations between candidates and citizens online during the Finnish Parliament Election 2015. We shortly contextualize the Finnish elections before discussing the data collection and analysis process in detail.

In the 37th Finnish national elections, held in April 2015, fifteen parties nominated a total of 2146 candidates. 73.3 percent of the candidates were representing a party already having parliamentary representation (Statistics Finland, 2015).

In total, 50.8 % of the candidates used Twitter and 52 % Facebook in their campaigning (Marttila et al., in press). The meaning of online services for citizens has been emphasized in Finland, since people spend more time per day in social media than they spend with traditional media (Statistics Finland, 2015). However, it is good to keep in mind that despite the popularity of social media in context of politics, its influence should not

be considered obvious. The use of the Internet for political purposes is typically lesser than its use for other reasons such as entertainment or even news reading (Dahlberg, 2005). According to surveys in Finland, 51% of the population is following social networking services, but only 6% express their political or social opinions online. In the Parliament Elections 2011 9% of the population reported that they followed the elections through social media (Strandberg, 2013).

Among the most important topics discussed in social media and traditional media prior to the 2015 elections were the state's challenging economic situation, the upcoming national social welfare and health care reform, employment issues and questions of national security, especially state's possible membership in the military alliance NATO (Nelimarkka et al., 2016).

Data collection and selection

The data used in this research was collected through three phases: large data collection, data filtering, and random selection of data.

The data represented candidates digital campaigning activities. In Facebook the data was collected from candidates' pages and included posts and comments to those pages. In Twitter, we collected the posts made by candidates and any mentions of the candidates. These activities were collected using the application programming interfaces in Twitter and Facebook, and were subcontracted from data collection company 99 Analytics.

After the computational data collection, a smaller group of conversation threads was systematically chosen from the whole data based on a pre-defined criteria. The criteria for selection the data was following:

1. The conversations took place during one-month-period before the voting time ended (March 19 - April 19, 2015). This period of time was chosen, because we assumed the campaigning is more active closer to the voting day.
2. At least one candidate and one non-candidate participated in the conversation. This criterion was chosen in order to make sure that both, citizens and candidates are involved in the conversation.
3. At least one candidate sent at least two messages in the conversation thread. This criterion was chosen to eliminate conversations where a candidate publishes a post, but never returns to comment on it.

After selecting conversations by using this criteria, the number of conversation threads came down to 544 Twitter conversations and 4 603 Facebook conversations. In the last phase of data selection, a random set of conversations was chosen for further analysis. The final data came down to 244 Twitter conversations containing 1503 tweets and to 189 Facebook conversations containing 1500 single messages.

Interaction analysis

In this research the research method used was interaction analysis. Interaction analysis is always based on observation and it is used to describe and to understand social

interaction processes (Meyers & Seibold, 2012; Valkonen & Laapotti, 2011, p. 46). In quantitative interaction analysis the communication is coded into smaller units that are placed to certain categories in a coding scheme. This kind of coding provides an efficient way for understanding and observing the structures and functions of social interaction. It provides a method for examining deeper-level communicative processes that help explain the communication on the surface-level as well (Meyers & Seibold, 2012, p. 329). Questions about the functions, patterns or structures invite the close systematic observation the coding allows (Meyers & Seibold, 2012, p. 331).

Coding social interactions includes several steps from unitizing the data and developing a coding scheme to determining coding reliability (Meyers & Seibold, 2012, p. 331). Here, the unit of analysis was an individual message - a tweet in Twitter and a single post or a comment in Facebook.

The coding was conducted based on certain principles that were created for the purposes of this study. First, all of the messages in the conversation threads were coded leaving none of the messages out, and the context unit was the thread in which the message was situated. Second, every unit was coded into 1-3 categories of the coding scheme. In other words, every unit could represent 1-3 communicative functions. This was done because several thoughts and several communicative functions can occur in one unit: one message may include several sentences, but also only one sentence may include several communicative functions that occur at the same time. Third, the context of interpretation is the conversation thread as a whole, as an understanding of the whole conversation is crucial in interpreting the meanings of the single messages.

In this study, the coding categories were created based on existing research on communicative functions (Bales, 1951; Bryant et al., 2011; Burlison, 2010; Canary et al., 2008; Graham et al., 2013). The communicative functions from existing research were combined to a one listing of communicative functions. This listing was modified – the overlapping communicative functions deleted, similar ones combined and new communicative functions created. For example campaign promotion and campaign update were combined as one communicative function as they were similar and often difficult to distinguish. Also communicative functions such as “giving advice” and “requesting an input from audience” were deleted as they overlapped with other communicative functions such as “sharing opinion” and “asking for an opinion” or “campaign promotion”. The first version of the coding scheme was modified based on rehearsal analysis on several sets of test data similar to the actual research data. During the test rounds several inadequacies were found and new communicative functions added and vague ones clarified. For example criticizing and praising were added as new communicative functions and the target for them was determined (political actor or non-political actor). Also positive and negative opinion sharing were separated as their own communicative functions at first, but combined again later to one single “opinion sharing”, as the differences turned out to be often very subtle and hard to separate.

The final coding scheme included 22 communicative functions that are organized under seven broader categories in the following way:

Information and opinion sharing

1. Sharing information

2. Expressing an idea, a wish or a suggestion
3. Sharing a hyperlink
4. Stating an opinion / taking a position
5. Agreeing or expressing acceptance

Information and opinion asking

6. Asking for information
7. Asking for an idea, a wish or a suggestion
8. Asking for an opinion

Critiquing and arguing

9. Disagreeing or expressing rejection
10. Critiquing a political actor (candidate or a politician)
11. Critiquing a non-political actor

Personal information sharing

12. Sharing personal information

Socio-emotional functions

13. Joking or expressing humour or amusement
14. Thanking or expressing gratefulness
15. Apologizing

Formal campaigning

16. Campaign-related organizing
17. Campaigning trail update or promotion
18. Mobilizing or antimobilizing (by a constituent)

Praising and expressing support

19. Praising a political actor (candidate or a politician)
20. Praising a non-political actor
21. Praising oneself
22. Expressing support to a candidate

Table 2

Communicative functions in Twitter and Facebook conversations (%)

Communicative function	Twitter			Facebook		
	Candidates	Citizens	Total	Candidates	Citizens	Total
Information and opinion sharing						
Sharing information	9,0	5,7	7,5	10,9	5,0	7,2
Expressing an idea, a wish or a suggestion	3,4	1,9	2,7	2,4	2,9	2,7
Sharing a hyperlink	6,7	3,4	5,3	5,0	3,0	3,7
Stating an opinion or taking a position	38,7	32,9	36,2	24,9	26,9	26,2
Agreeing or expressing acceptance	3,5	2,7	3,1	4,1	2,8	3,3
Function total	61,2	46,6	54,9	47,2	40,5	43
Information and opinion asking						
Asking for information	2,2	4,3	3,1	2,5	4,8	3,9
Asking for an idea, a wish or a suggestion	0,2	0,0	0,1	0,1	0,1	0,1
Asking for an opinion	7,8	17,3	11,9	2,6	5,6	4,5
Function total	10,2	21,6	15,1	5,2	10,5	8,6
Critiquing and arguing						
Critiquing a non-political actor	0,7	0,6	0,7	0,4	1,0	0,8
Critiquing a political actor (candidate or a politician)	1,5	4,5	2,8	0,4	4,1	2,7
Disagreeing or expressing rejection	5,0	6,7	5,7	1,6	6,6	4,8
Function total	7,2	11,8	9,2	2,4	11,8	8,3
Personal information sharing						
Sharing personal information	8,7	9,2	8,9	11,0	9,2	9,8
Function total	8,7	9,2	8,9	11,0	9,2	9,8
Socio-emotional functions						
Joking or expressing humour or amusement	4,4	5,3	4,8	3,7	3,4	3,5
Thanking or expressing gratefulness	1,9	0,6	1,4	8,5	1,1	3,8
Apologizing	0,1	0,2	0,1	0,0	0,0	0,0
Function total	6,4	6,1	6,2	12,3	4,5	7,3
Formal campaigning						
Campaigning trail update or promotion	4,5	0,0	2,6	19,1	0,1	7,1
Mobilizing or antimobilizing (by a citizen)	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,7	0,5
Function total	4,5	0,0	2,6	19,1	0,8	7,5
Praising and expressing support						
Praising a political actor (candidate/politician)	0,8	1,7	1,2	0,6	7,8	5,2
Praising a non-political actor	0,5	0,1	0,3	0,5	0,1	0,2
Praising oneself	0,1	0,1	0,1	0,6	0,5	0,5
Expressing support for a candidate	0,3	2,7	1,4	1,2	14,4	9,5
Function total	1,7	4,6	3,0	3,0	22,7	15,5
Total	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0
Total (n)	1215	931	2196	808	1386	2194

After the coding category was ready, an inter-coder reliability check was carried out by two of the authors. The check was carried out to a random sample of Facebook and Twitter conversations that were not part of the actual research data but similar to it. The test data amounted to approximately 10 per cent of the actual data amount including 301 messages, 151 from Facebook and 150 from Twitter. The intercoder reliability check was done by using an online tool called Coding Analysis Toolkit (Coding Analysis Toolkit, 2015). The check was done for the entire category, which included all the 22 categories.

Krippendorff's Alpha was used to estimate the intercoder reliability. During the first rounds of testing intercoder reliability, the scores weren't adequate. The coding scheme was improved by clarifying the descriptions of each category. After two rounds of refining the coding scheme, the overall reliability scores (α) for the communicative functions were following: Twitter 0.860 and Facebook 0.862. These scores are regarded sufficient for further analysis.

Findings

Communicative functions in social media services

The results reported in Table 2 show that *information and opinion sharing* was the most common category of communicative functions in Twitter and Facebook conversations. When we look at the category more carefully, it is obvious that stating an opinion was the most common communicative function in both platforms (36 % of all communicative

functions in Twitter; 26 % of all communicative functions in Facebook). In Twitter, it seemed that candidates were more active in opinion stating, where as in Facebook citizens were more active on this. However, the differences are rather minor for Facebook 2%-units, but for Twitter we observed 6%-unit difference. Opinion sharing included an expression where the user stated an opinion, attitude, vision or a view towards an issue, and typically the opinions were backed up with facts, feelings and own experiences.

Sharing information was the second most common communicative function in both platforms (7 % in Facebook; 8 % in Twitter). Information sharing was fact-based or generally acknowledged information of an issue, event or a person. Often information sharing was based on introducing a report, fact sheet or an official document, but it also included stating information on upcoming events, sharing information from media sources or quoting other people and politicians during e.g. televised debates. In contrast to sharing information and opinions, expressing an idea (3 %), sharing hyperlink (4 % in Facebook; 6 % in Twitter), and agreeing or expressing acceptance (3 %) were represented in only a very small amount of all communicative functions.

Sharing information and opinions was notably more common than asking them from others. As seen in Table 2 *Information and opinion asking* was the second most common category of communicative functions in Twitter conversations (15 %) and third most common category in Facebook conversations (9 %). According to the results, asking for opinion was notably more common (5 % in Facebook; 12% in Twitter) than asking for information (4 % and 3 %) or for an idea, a wish or a suggestion (0 %). Not surprising, citizens were more about twice as active in this function (in Twitter 22%, in Facebook 10%, where as candidates contribute 10% in Twitter and 5% in Facebook).

Personal information sharing was third largest category in Facebook (10 %) and fourth largest in Twitter (9 %). This category included sharing information of oneself, one's personal life, own experiences and daily life or any other information that could be regarded as private or personal. The personal information candidates shared, was typically related to campaigning events and to their daily schedules whereas constituents shared information on their voting decisions. Sensitive or very in-depth information on user's personal life was not typically shared. However, we highlight that citizens were typically as active as candidates to share personal information. To a large extent these updates concerned citizens own voting decisions or voting activities.

Critiquing and arguing was the third largest category in Twitter (9 %) and fourth most common category in Facebook (8 %). When we look at the category more carefully, we find out disagreeing or expressing rejection amounted to 5 % of all communicative functions in Facebook; and to 6 % of all communicative functions in Twitter, whereas only very little criticism was expressed. The critique was more often targeted towards political actors (3 %) than non-political actors (1 %), and was done more by citizens (12% in both services, candidates were less than 8%).

Praising was clearly more common in Facebook than in Twitter conversations. In Facebook expressing support to a candidate was clearly more common in Facebook (10 %) than in Twitter (1 %). Also, praising accounted to 6 % of all communicative functions in Facebook and only 2 % in Twitter. Praising was mostly targeted towards political actor (5 % in Facebook and 1 % in Twitter). Also *formal campaigning* was clearly more common in Facebook than in Twitter conversations. In Facebook, formal campaigning amounted to 8

Table 3
Differences in Facebook and Twitter conversations

	Twitter	Facebook
Active party	The candidates sent 54% of the tweets; the citizens 43%	The citizens sent 63% of the messages; candidates 37%
Stating and asking for opinions	Almost half of all communicative functions (48%), opinions asked more (12%)	One third of all communicative functions (31%), opinions asked less (5%)
Most common communicative functions	Sharing hyperlinks (6%), disagreeing (6%), expressing humor and amusement (5%)	Support (10%), campaigning updates (7%), praising (5%), disagreeing (5%)
Tone of conversation	More critical: more criticism (3%) than praising (2%), only little campaign support expressed (1%)	More positive: more praising (6%), showing support (10%) more typical than criticizing (4%)

% of all communicative functions, whereas in Twitter the equivalent number was only 3 %. Formal campaigning included mainly campaigning trail updates or promotions, and thus was more done by candidates. In Facebook, citizens had slight activity on this (1%).

According to the results, *Socio-emotional functions* were equally common in Facebook (7 %) than in Twitter (6 %). Thanking or expressing gratefulness was more typical in Facebook (4 %) than in Twitter (1 %). In addition, joking or expressing humor and amusement consisted of 4 % in all communicative functions in Facebook and 5 % in Twitter, whereas apologizing was not typical at all (0 %). Furthermore, the findings suggest that in Twitter citizens and candidates were as active in socio-emotional content (6% in both), whereas in Facebook candidates were much more active (12%, 5%).

Our results reveal that there are lots of similarities in the conversations in Twitter and in Facebook. However, there are also evident differences in the communicative functions between the Twitter and Facebook. The most obvious differences between the two platforms are presented in Table 3.

Differences between Facebook and Twitter

As table 3 shows, the candidates participated in the conversations more actively in Twitter (54%) than in Facebook (37%). Also, both the candidates and citizens shared opinions and information more actively in Twitter (55%) than in Facebook (43%). Similarly, opinions were also asked more often in Twitter (15%) compared to Facebook (9%).

As seen in Table 2, in Twitter sharing hyperlinks (6%), disagreeing (6%) and expressing humor and amusement (5%) were more prevalent than in Facebook. On the other hand, conversations in Facebook were more closely connected to campaign-related communicative functions such as supporting the candidates (10%), updating from the campaign trail (7%), and praising the candidates (5%).

The overall tone of conversations was more positive in Facebook and more critical in Twitter. In Facebook, positive and supportive communicative functions such as praising and

expressing support to candidate (Facebook 15%; Twitter 2%) were more common than in Twitter. On the other hand, conversations in Twitter included more critiquing and arguing (9%) than praising (3%).

Discussion

The characteristics of conversations

The conversation between the candidates and the constituents on social media during election campaign seemed to compromise mostly on stating and asking for opinions or sharing and searching for information. These results are similar to the recent findings stating that social media is becoming a space where ideas and issues are debated between the politicians and the citizens (e.g., Grant et al., 2010).

An interesting notion was that stating opinions and taking positions was notably more common than asking for others' opinions in both of the social media platforms. Hence, it seems that a candidate's pro activeness and will to contribute to a conversation are essential in order for the conversations to build up and to continue. Opinion-heavy conversations make it also, in theory, accessible for anyone to join an ongoing conversation. However, at the same time it easily restricts the participants to those who feel they possess adequate knowledge and understanding of the issues debated, and who already show an interest in politics (see e.g. Bimber, 2012; Warner et al., 2012). From the perspective of digital democracy and participation this generates a gap between the politically-savvy and the laymen.

Interestingly, conversations in Facebook and Twitter contained more critical than positive communicative functions. The results show that candidates and citizens express disagreement and rejection more often than agreement and acceptance during their conversations on social media. However, it is natural that when users have contrasting views, the conversation continues more likely as the parties are arguing and attempting to convince the other party of their own point of view; in contrast, when the discussants agree on something, the conversations tend to be rather short. Previous research has noted that users in social media discuss actively especially with people that have contrasting or opposing views to themselves (Yardi & Boyd, 2010). It is also important to keep in mind that the nonverbal cues present in face-to-face communication are for the most part missing in technology-mediated communication, which may cause misunderstandings and misinterpretations more easily (Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984). This may in turn cause disagreement and expression of strong opposing views more easily.

Surprisingly, the results indicate that personal information was shared actively in both platforms. Social media has been found to a forum where the focus of attention is on the individual politician rather than the political party, and it has been acclaimed of expanding the political arena for increased personalized campaigning and individual initiatives (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013). In the light of our analysis this holds true and also follows the recent trend of the personalization of politics, especially in digital environment (Bennett, 2012). Therefore, it is not surprising that the candidates highlight and underline themselves and their own actions in social media leaving the party promoting as subordinate. However, personal sharing took place in rather superficial level, and during the conversations, the candidates only seldom referred to their family and private life or any other activities

outside the campaigning events. These findings indicate that the candidates are distancing their private lives from their public ones and emphasizing their professional identities as politicians. This is not surprising regarding the public nature of social media, which for the most candidates, seems to be more suitable for public policy- and campaign-related conversation rather than for sharing personal matters.

The results of this study indicate that formal campaigning – communicative functions such as mobilizing, campaigning updates and self-promotion – were not dominating in the conversations between the candidates and the constituents. Instead, sharing opinions and asking for others' thoughts, distributing and searching for information, and sharing personal information were the most prevalent communicative functions. These findings suggest that messages that are policy- or issue-oriented or include a personal view generate further conversation more easily than messages that advertise the candidate. This assumption is supported by previous findings that suggest that followers engage selectively with campaign messages and interact more likely with policy-oriented posts rather than with promotional (Gerodimos & Justinussen, 2014). Hence, being personal – rather than conducting general campaigning and news-sharing – might generate more interactivity and efficiency in social media and thus be more beneficial for campaigning.

The medium is the message: Differences between Facebook and Twitter

The results revealed that even though conversation between the candidates and the constituents is similar in Facebook and in Twitter in many ways, there are also distinct differences in the communicative functions between the two platforms. We are not able to stay if these differences are caused by the communicative affordances, the different user populations in these services or different behavioral and cultural expectations and norms. However, these differences highlight the need to conduct further comparative analysis, as some of the findings per media are not explicitly replicated across various media services.

The candidates participated in the conversations with citizens more actively on Twitter than on Facebook. The candidates and citizens stated and asked for opinions more actively on Twitter than on Facebook. These findings indicate that the conversation between the candidates and the citizens is more reciprocal on Twitter than on Facebook. Also previous research indicates that Twitter is increasingly becoming a space for continuous dialogue between the candidates and the electorate (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013; Grant et al., 2010; Larsson, 2015), whereas politicians have been found to use Facebook as a platform for broadcasting information rather than answering citizens messages or engaging in two-way communication (Ross et al., 2014).

According to the results, conversations in Facebook contained more positive communicative functions than conversations in Twitter. Users also expressed slightly more disagreement in Twitter conversations than in Facebook conversations. This is an interesting finding since previous research suggests that Twitter is used typically for branding and positive impression management (Syn & Oh, 2015; Vainikka & Huhtamäki, 2015). However, according to the results, during the 2015 election campaigning in Finland, Twitter seemed to be a platform for more critical conversation than Facebook. Then again, according to the results, sharing hyperlinks and expressing humor and amusement were more prevalent in Twitter than in Facebook. Previous research has recognized that humor is often combined with sharing hyperlinks, and that interestingly, jokes, humor and wittiness seem to

be beneficial for political campaigning (Freelon & Karpf, 2014).

The results reveal that conversations in Facebook are more closely connected to campaign-related communicative functions such as supporting the candidates, promotion and updating from the campaign trail, and praising the candidates. Facebook seems to be a typical platform to endorse the candidates, and the tone of conversations seems to more positive in Facebook than in Twitter. Existing research shows that Facebook is typically used for sustaining and maintaining already existing relationships rather than looking for new ones (Anderson, Fagan, Woodnutt, & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2012; Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfield, 2006). Therefore, it is possible that in Facebook the citizens have conversations more likely with candidates they like and know rather than candidates they dislike. Further, we assume that the positive tone observed in Facebook discussions is to a large extent explained by the technological and social affordances of the platform: it encourages users to “like” politicians or their posts. Also, the conversation threads in the research data were collected from the public pages of the candidates, which means that the people that like or follow these pages are more likely friends and supporters of the candidates rather than users that dislike them.

All in all, the results of this paper indicate that Twitter and Facebook have different profiles when it comes to political conversation and election-related discussions. However, it is important to note the different audience composition and communication culture of these services – a one form of environmental factor i.e. social affordance. One of the main reasons behind the differences is most likely related to the user groups and therefore the style of communication and discussion genres in these platforms: in Finland, the users of Twitter have been identified to represent the political elite, users with high societal positions, and journalists (Vainikka & Huhtamäki, 2015). This kind of user base is more likely used to express criticism and argument critically, which might contribute to the critical tone in conversations. Also, users with strong and very polarized political opinions have more likely the tendency to take part in political conversations compared to users with moderate political views (Gainous & Wagner, 2014, p. 118, 136). Facebook, then again, is used more widely within the population (Pönkä, 2014). Hence, the nature of conversation between politicians and average citizens is more reliably studied on Facebook. This is also reflected in the larger amount of citizen contributions in the Facebook data.

Limitations

The findings should be carefully balanced against the limitations in this research. Most significantly, we study Finnish culture and Finnish electoral system. Traditionally, the Finnish political culture has been characterized as a consensus culture (Pernaa & Railo, 2012), which has been accused of preventing political debate. As Herkman (2012) concludes, the Finnish consensus system has traditions and institutions that do not support the use of more dialogic forms of communication. Therefore the role of the Internet should not be over-hyped. However, in recent years the Finnish political culture has turned in a more open and dialogic direction indicated e.g. by political scandals and the rise of populism (Kantola, 2011; Pernaa & Railo, 2012; Reunanen, Kunelius, & Noppari, 2010). Similarly, the multi-party and proportional election system of Finland affects the strategies for communication, for instance decrease the amount of negative campaigning.

Secondly, social media data collection using a “big data” approach is, while promising, also limited, e.g., due to users’ privacy settings or the challenge to collect everyone involved in the discourse. Furthermore, the Twitter API is known to be somewhat challenging for research data collection (Bruns, Burgess, Crawford, & Shaw, 2012; Lorentzen & Nolin, 2015; McKelvey, DiGrazia, & Rojas, 2014). It also needs to be noted that the development of a code book and classification of the content is never a neutral process. We have conducted inter-coder reliability checks to confirm the clarity of the code book and coding practices to decrease the limitations of related to qualitative data classification.

Conclusions

In this paper we explored the communication between the candidates and the citizens in social media during the Finnish parliamentary election 2015. Since social media is increasingly extensively used as a platform for conversations between the candidates and the citizen, but the content of these conversations have not been extensively researched before, we decided to focus on looking at the interpersonal communication between the candidates and the constituents. We narrowed our focus to the communicative functions in the conversation threads in order to get a better and more detailed understanding of what happens when the candidates and the electorate engage in conversations online. In addition, we studied the differences in communicative functions between these two platforms.

Prior research on politicians’ and candidates’ interaction suggests that politicians are mostly broadcasting their messages from top to down instead of taking the advantage of the participatory potential of social media (Graham et al., 2013, 2014; Khaldarova, Laaksonen, & Matikainen, 2012; Lilleker et al., 2011; Stromer-Galley, 2000). Therefore, the expectations were that broadcasting would be prevalent also in the conversations between the candidates and the citizen. However, according to the results of this article, conversations between the candidates and the citizens in social media during the parliamentary election largely consisted of stating opinions and taking positions, and asking for others’ opinions. The participants also distributed and asked for fact-based information, shared personal information of their lives, argued, and supported or criticized each other views. In the light of these results, our study provides evidence that the candidates and the constituents do have meaningful and insightful conversations where they distribute information, share ideas and reflect on each others’ opinions and thoughts.

An interesting finding is that citizens actively discuss with political candidates on social media, and they also proactively ask for information and candidates’ opinions on various issues. These findings indicate a slowly changing shift social media has brought to the traditional perception of campaign: whereas campaign communications was previously seen as one-way, persuasive and propaganda-style communication, it seems that it is now perceived more as participatory culture of two-way campaign communication consisting of a completely new set of communicative rules (cf., Lilleker & Jackson, 2010). The findings suggest that the electorate increasingly acknowledge the potential of straight interpersonal conversations the social media is enabling with the politicians.

What is important from a cross-media perspective is that the discussion were similar in Facebook and Twitter in many ways, but also several differences in the conversations between the platforms were found. Messages on Facebook were more often campaign-related and a positive tone prevailed in the discussions. Twitter, however, emerged as an

arena for debated and conversations, many of which held a critical tone. We assumed this is a finding explained by the technological and social affordances of the platforms as well as the differing user base of the services: Facebook is the most commonly used social media services in Finland whereas Twitter is an arena of the educated elite. Hence, we suggest that the differences between the communicative patterns of functions are mostly explained by social affordances elicited by the conversation culture that has developed through the practices of the dominant users.

All in all, the findings of this study give more insights on political online conversations and the role of social media in election-related communication. The results provide more information on an important and constantly growing phenomena, interpersonal political communication online, and its implications for democracy and political participation. We believe the present study brings a fresh contribution to the existing research of political communication on social media as it looks closely on the conversation threads in social media instead of broadly looking at single one-way messages during election campaigning. In addition, the study also provides a methodological contribution: interaction analysis has been used mainly to study face-to-face communication. In present research it was applied to interpersonal online communication. Finally, the research frame makes it possible to explore differences in social interactions between Twitter and Facebook. Our results indicate clear differences in the interactive uses and micro-level communication practices in Twitter and Facebook. Hence, we find it crucial to conduct more comparative studies on the use of social media instead of regarding it as one unity as often is the case.

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