

Perceptions of Social Media

A Joint Arena for Voters and Politicians?

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Abstract

While observers have focused on the political use of social media when exploring their democratic potential, we know little about users' perceptions of these media. These perceptions could well be important to understanding the political use of social media. In exploring users' perceptions, the article asks whether politicians and voters view social media in a similar way, and to what extent they consider social media to be an apt arena for political communication. Within a Norwegian context, which may prove useful as a critical case, and using the technological frames model, we find that although voters' and politicians' opinions are not that dissimilar overall, politicians are more likely to recognize the political communicative role of social media. However, social media do indeed have the potential to become arenas for political mobilization among groups that traditionally are less visible in political arenas.

Keywords: political communication, social media, perceptions, voters, politicians, Norway

Introduction: The Democratic Potential of Social Media

The rapid expansion of social media and the public's enthusiastic reception and use of them in everyday life seemed to promise an imminent revitalization of democratic processes. Social media provide a vehicle that allows people to get together and develop communicative communities in a virtual public sphere (Grönlund, Strandberg & Himmelroos 2009). Social media were presumed to enable communication between citizens and politicians, to be a place to discuss issues and share opinions to a far higher degree than with conventional means (Papacharissi 2009, Shirky 2008). In other words, social media could become an important arena for the public to debate issues and where the voice of the individual voter and politician could be heard. But social media could also help politicians campaigning for election mobilize support and voters, enhancing their electoral chances in a direct way (Karlsen 2011). Social media would not only become "sites of information" but "sites of action": information-sharing platforms and conduits of direct communication. While expectations remain high in some places, the empirical evidence thus far has shown that social media perform less well as democratic deliberative arenas in the context of stable democracies.

As previous research has shown, the unique democratic potential of social media, and of Internet communication in general, to widen inclusion and participation has yet to manifest itself. Political communication online is still something that principally en-

gages the already politically active (that is, offline) (Segaard & Nielsen 2013). It is often stated that online political communication is compromised because it is uni-directional, flowing from the parties and leading candidates to the voters (Karlsen 2009: 9). “Public deliberation”, Strandberg concludes, “is generally not found online” (2008: 85). The reasons given to explain this state of affairs stem from the digital-divide perspective, which emphasizes the socioeconomic hallmarks of the actors as well as their political interests – the reinforcement hypothesis (Norris 2001). But although the research has given us many answers, it has not given us all of them. While observers have focused on the use of social media, we know little about actors’ perceptions of social media as a platform for political communication. These perceptions could well be important to understanding the use of social media, because behavior arguably reflects underlying understandings of the media as technological platforms of communication (Orlikowski & Gash 1994). Previous research has therefore failed to show whether non-realization of the touted democratic benefits of social media is due to the actors having different perceptions. If social media are to be a significant platform for political communication between politicians and voters, both groups of actors need to recognize social media as such a platform. This article attempts to remedy this shortcoming by focusing on voters’ and politicians’ perceptions of social media.

We know that users of social media differ in many respects; there are private as well as public and commercial actors, and they use social media to achieve different ends: some to talk in private with friends and acquaintances, some for entertainment and business while others use them to voice political opinions and engage with the politically interested public. This concerns perceptions of social media as a tool that allows users to create and share their messages, in the form of texts, pictures, videos and links (Enjolras et al. 2013). These different perceptions of social media may well complicate communication between the participating actors – the sender(s) and receiver(s). Successful communication means the successful encoding and decoding of messages by the sender and receiver in accordance with what they presume to be a shared understanding of the context as well as the medium (Jakobson 1960: 3). This is the case with successful political communication, too.

If social media are ever going to become a significant platform for political communication between politicians and voters, both groups will need to perceive these media as a useful means of communicating. In other words, if voters primarily consider social media as a vehicle for private conversation or entertainment, it will not be easy for politicians to reach voters through social media and get their message across. In the present study, social media are operationalized by examples such as blogs, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube and Flickr.

In exploring the perceptions of users, the article asks *whether politicians and voters view social media in a similar way, and more specifically, to what extent they consider social media to be an apt arena for exchanging political information and communicating.*

To address these issues, the article maps voters’ and politicians’ perceptions of social media and discusses possible explanations in an attempt to answer two underlying questions: Do voters and politicians tally with each other? Do the perceptions of voters and politicians have similar explanations at the individual level with regard to central background factors?

We explore these questions in a Norwegian context. More than 90 percent of the Norwegian population has access to the Internet at home, and three out of five participate in social media (Statistics Norway 2012). The young and middle aged have the highest involvement, but it is quite high – and increasing – among seniors. These statistics put Norway in the vanguard of the global information society (Eurostat 2011). Social media, it is safe to say, are now an integral part of everyday life for most people in Norway. We would therefore expect users to see social media as an important information and communication tool, and useful for many things – entertainment, private relations as well as politics. Moreover, population density in Norway is generally low and many places are geographically rather inaccessible, making social media particularly useful as a means of political communication. We know that more than one third of the adult population participates in at least one debate on the Internet; 22 percent participate in at least one debate on Facebook (Enjolras 2013: 119). The overall conclusion in new Norwegian research on political use of social media is in fact that the reinforcement hypothesis is not confirmed in Norway (Enjolras et. al. 2013). In this sense, the Norwegian case may prove useful as *a critical case* regarding use of social media as a vehicle to enable communication between voters and politicians. One implication of the critical case perspective is that if we expect people – voters and politicians – to value social media as a useful platform for sharing information, exchanging opinions and engaging in discussions on political matters, we would certainly expect them to do so in this case.

The present study is based on data from two identical questionnaire batteries concerning how voters and politicians view social media. The questionnaire batteries were used in two quantitative surveys, one of the general population (the voters) and one of political candidates during the 2011 local elections. These data – which reflect the same context, same time and identical batteries – give us a unique opportunity to investigate the main question of this article, which is whether social media are perceived as an apt platform for political communication.

The following section reviews the main conclusions of earlier research on social media as a political tool and – based on this review – explains what we expect the present analysis to reveal. After presenting the methodological design and the dependent variables, we analyze voters' and politicians' views on social media. The concluding section summarizes the main results regarding the potential of social media as arenas on which political information can be spread and politicians and voters can communicate.

A Framework. Previous Research and Expectations

Lacking any previous research with a specific focus on politicians' and voters' perceptions and expectations of social media, for the present purposes we assume a close relationship between attitudes and actual behavior. This assumption is based on the MODE model of Attitude-Behavior Processes (Fazio 1990, Fazio & Towles-Schwen 1999), according to which "attitudes [are presumed to have] an effect upon behavior" (1999: 97). Such assumptions about a relationship between perceptions and use are widespread and to some extent confirmed by more general media research (e.g., Cohen, Tsifti & Sheaffer 2008, Treviño, Webster & Stein 2000, Kioussis 2001, Jarvenpaa & Staples 2000, Kim, Wyatt & Katz 1999). Moreover, we base our framework on the *technological frames*

model of Wanda J. Orlikowski and Debra C. Gash (1994), whose premises rely on the social cognitive perspective. This model's key argument is that

an understanding of people's interpretations of a technology is critical to understanding their interaction with it. To interact with technology, people have to make sense of it; and in this sense-making process, they develop particular assumptions, expectations, and knowledge of the technology, which then serve to shape subsequent actions toward it. (1994: 175)

Like Orlikowski and Gash, we also find it appropriate to consider the actors in question as members of different social groups. In our case, the groups are voters and politicians.

Voters and politicians, as two distinctive groups, may have different interpretations of social media, which are constrained by their different knowledge bases, objectives, and the wider context. For this reason, we are likely to find incongruence in technology frames between voters and politicians. Incongruence can lead to misunderstandings and difficulties in interacting and communicating, Orlikowski and Gash conclude (1994: 180). Congruence is, on the other hand, an important condition for successful communication between voters and politicians. However, given the view that politicians act strategically and that "politicians' belief in the power of media increases their motivation and effort to appear in media" (Cohen, Tsfaty & Sheaffer 2008: abstract), we expect to see their perceptions reflect their experiences of voters' actual behavior and views. *That is, we should expect consistency between politicians' and voters' respective views on what they consider to be appropriate platforms for communicating with each other.*

Nevertheless, one objection to this collective perspective on voters and politicians is that they are individuals and that characteristics of persons influence media perceptions and behaviors as well. Moreover, Papacharissi and Rubin (2000: 180), drawing on use-and-gratifications theory, underline the complexity of factors that determinate actual media use: "Certain social and psychological factors, along with perceptions of the medium, should influence Internet use." We agree – and indeed argue – that technological frames are individually held in addition to being social phenomena. We take this perspective into account when we analyze the two groups separately in light of demographic, socioeconomic, political, and ICT-related factors. The question is whether the social media frame is affected by individual background factors.

With this framework in mind, in this section on previous research we draw on the actual political use of social media and formulate some expectations about voters' and politicians' perceptions of social media.

Ever since Pippa Norris launched the digital divide perspective and the reinforcement hypothesis in 2001, the international research on political Internet communication, and later social media, has almost unanimously concluded that there is no reason to expect the unique democratic potential of the online media to engage broad swathes of the public to automatically manifest itself in political communication. On the contrary, the use of new media in the political space reinforces rather than reduces existing political inequalities between different groups of citizens (e.g., Enjolras & Segard 2011, Torpe 2007, Strandberg 2008, Fuller 2004, Sipior & Ward 2005).

The reinforcement argument has undoubtedly proven its value, but the fact that times change – as do the available technology and people's use of it – justifies new studies. This is especially the case in Norway owing to changes in the underlying conditions of

inequality in access to and use of the new technologies. The question of accessibility is almost irrelevant in Norway and the reinforcement argument is no longer confirmed by Norwegian empirical research (Enjolras et al. 2013: 52/130).

The conclusions of previous Norwegian studies are pertinent in this regard. The normalization of social media as a communicative platform for most Norwegians, the surveys found, had impacted communication in general and communication within the political sphere in particular. One of the researchers, Rune Karlsen (2011), found that Norwegian politicians used social media extensively in the run-up to the 2009 national election. It got a great deal of public attention, though only a minority of voters actually visited the politicians' blogs or examined their Facebook profiles. This finding – that politicians are more prone to use social media than voters are – was confirmed by Seggaard and Nielsen's study on election blogs during the 2011 local elections. Politicians writing election blogs are overwhelmingly male. However, when Seggaard and Nielsen asked respondents about the use of social media with a private profile in the local election campaign, gender differences were not to be found among the politicians, whereas young politicians are more likely to use social media than senior politicians. Also politicians with a specific focus on young voters are bigger users of social media than their colleagues are. Furthermore, and other things being equal, high ICT competence seems to have a positive effect on politicians' use of social media in election campaigns, while education, income, and political experience do not seem to matter as much. On this basis, the researchers conclude that the use of social media in political campaigns may have a democratic effect on which of the politicians get to speak in public. This conclusion is supported by Danish studies as well (Hansen & Hoff 2010: 19).

Regarding the voters and the population in general, recent Norwegian research on political use of social media among young people found that social media are in fact operating as arenas for the exercise of active citizenship, though the use of social media as political tools is reserved for the few (Enjolras & Seggaard 2011). Moreover, people who use one online arena for political purposes are most likely to use others as well (Enjolras et al. 2013:119-120). However, social media also mobilize new groups to get (more) involved in politics. People with little political interest grow more interested over time from using social media. Overall, and looking across the political use of all kinds of social media, especially Facebook, gender does not seem to matter. However, in some kinds of social media like Twitter and blogs the political debate is dominated by male users. Compared with other arenas hosting political debate, participants tend overwhelmingly to be younger people. The effect of education varies depending on the kind of political activity on social media. In general, education does not seem to have a significant effect on the political use of social media (for details, Enjolras & Seggaard 2011).

To sum up, the reinforcement hypothesis is generally not confirmed by the Norwegian data; the political use of social media does not seem to support expectations created by the digital divide perspective to any great extent. However, it is still the most politically active people offline and with a high degree of political interest that top the use of social media for political purposes, but the political use of social media does stimulate the political interest of people with little original interest in politics as well. Moreover, the impact of gender is absent when looking at voters' political use of social media in general, including Facebook, but on other social media, male debaters are in the major-

ity. The significance of age and education level are more noticeable, but in a way that is inconsistent with the reinforcement argument. Given our theoretical framework, we expect similar correlations between these individual background variables and perceptions of social media in a political context. The extent to which this is actually the case will be clarified in our empirical analyses.

In relation to the main questions posed here, we close this review of the conclusions of previous research on the actual political use of social media with the expectations that Norwegian voters and politicians do indeed view social media in a similar way, and more specifically, that they to a great degree consider this new media platform to be an apt joint arena for exchanging political information and communication. In doing so, we rely on the belief that the frames of social media as a new technology for political communication provide a background for understanding the actual behavior and use of social media, that politicians act rationally and that Norway is a critical case.

How to Measure Perception of Social Media

The study builds on empirical data derived from two quantitative surveys carried out in the weeks after the Norwegian local elections of 2011. Local elections at the municipal and county level are held every fourth year and voter turnout is about 64 percent. A web-based questionnaire was addressed to all local politicians who were standing for election at the municipal and/or county level in the region of Sogn and Fjordane and who had a publicly¹ accessible e-mail address. Seventy percent of all politicians standing for election had such an address. In total, 780 politicians answered the survey (response rate 40 percent). Given the specific context and characteristic of the respondents, the results of this survey can be generalized to many local politicians in Norway – politicians in small and medium-sized municipalities with a publicly accessible e-mail address.² The second data set comes from the Local Democracy Survey 2011 (LDS 2011), a representative population survey at the national level (for details, see Bergh & Christensen 2013). We use LDS 2011 data obtained verbally by telephone and in writing through the postal service, but only the 1,068 respondents who took part in both are included in our analysis. They make up 60.2 percent of all respondents in the LDS 2011.

The study uses a battery of five statements to measure voters' and politicians' perception of social media (see Table 1). Four of the statements were identical, while one (statement 5) was adjusted to fit a voter's and a politician's perspective, respectively. This means that the "I" person in statement 5a is a politician, while the "I" person in statement 5b is a voter.

The respondents were asked to respond to each of the statements by indicating level of agreement on a four-point scale: "agree completely," "agree in part," "disagree in part," and "disagree completely." For statements 2–5, a high value – disagreement – indicates that social media are considered useful as a political platform, while the opposite is the case for the more general statement 1, which is without any objections.

Statements 1, 2, and 3 are more general in character, while statements 4 and 5 are more practical, as they refer to the respondents' preferences regarding their own participation in social media versus more conventional arenas for political communication. The impression of *usefulness* at a general and practical individual level is in this sense the keyword for understanding the implications of high or low perception.

Table 1. *Statements Measuring Perceptions of Social Media as a Political Platform*

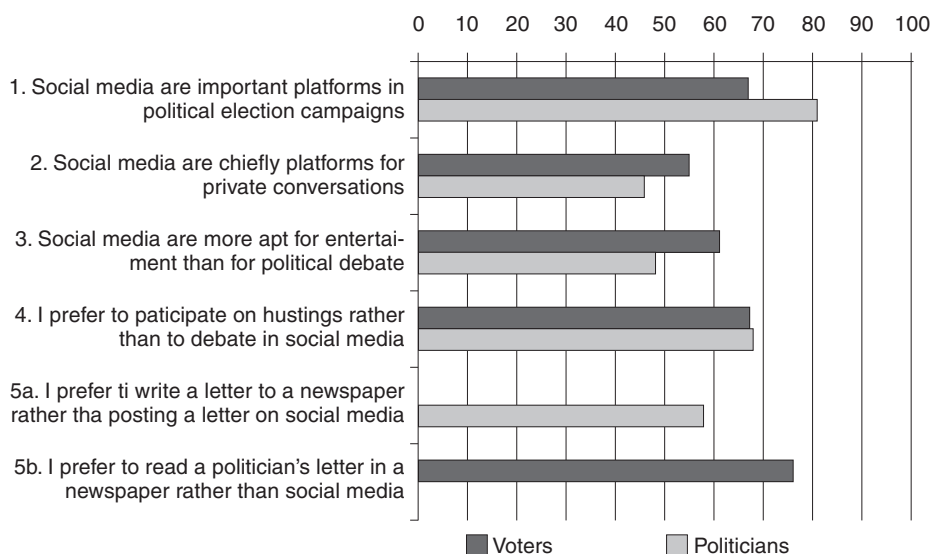
NO.	Statement
1	Social media are important platforms in political election campaigns
2	Social media are chiefly platforms for private conversations
3	Social media are more apt for entertainment than for political debate
4	I prefer to participate on hustings rather than to debate in social media
5a	I prefer to write a letter to a newspaper rather than posting a letter on social media
5b	I prefer to read a politician's letter in a newspaper than social media

Social Media as an Apt Arena for Political Communication?³

In this section, we answer *whether politicians and voters consider social media in a similar way – and more specifically as an apt arena for political information and communication*. As argued by the technological frame model, this is an important condition for using social media as a successful communication arena for politicians and voters alike. In the last part of the section, we identify the factors that determine the perceptions of social media as an apt arena for political communication by analyzing these specific views in light of central background factors at the level of the individual.

Voters' and Politicians' Perceptions

Previous research has approached use of social media in light of categories such as entertainment, private and political use. Looking closely at our five statements, we will be able to do the same regarding voters' and politicians' perceptions of social media.

Figure 1. *Voters' and Politicians' Perceptions of Social Media. Percentage who partly or completely agree*

"Don't know"-responses are coded as missing values.

N_{voter}: 929-1026 N_{politician}: 704-735

The frequencies in Figure 1 reveal that voters and politicians share many of the same perceptions of social media, though there are some interesting differences.

First of all, both voters and politicians are divided between those who recognize social media as a suitable political arena and those who do not. However, politicians are generally more likely to see social media as a platform for political communication. More than 80 percent of politicians agree that social media are important in election campaigns, while the figure for voters is 67 percent. This is an interesting observation, because from an overall perspective it indicates that the majority of voters and politicians have largely the same view of social media as a tool for political communication, in that sense they are cognizant of the role social media play in a political context. However, this is when no objections are mentioned.

When confronted with two popular ways of understanding social media – as an arena for private conversations and entertainment – slightly fewer than 50 percent of the politicians, but 55–61 percent of the voters, agree that social media are better for these purposes. However, a large minority of both groups does not agree.

Regarding the more practical perceptions and how voters and politicians actually prefer to be informed and participate in political matters, we see that they have the same opinion about hustings versus debate in social media. Slightly less than 70 percent prefer participation on hustings, while about one in three does not prefer hustings to debating in social media. Given the fact that very few actually join hustings, this finding can be interpreted as a marked preference for face-to-face meetings rather than online meetings, or perhaps just as a “politically correct” answer. When it comes to the use of newspapers versus social media, a significantly smaller share of the politicians prefer to write a letter to a newspaper (58%) than voters who prefer to read letters to the editor (76%) – in comparison with postings on social media. This difference could be a sign of a challenge with practical implications: The messages of political actors do not reach their intended recipients – the voters. But it is also the case that the minority of voters who disagree with the statement is relatively large (24%).

Looking at Figure 1, it is tempting to note the differences between the voters and the politicians and the fact that many have a positive opinion about social media as an integrative political arena. However, the differences are relatively small and the proportion of voters and politicians who are more guarded in their praise is conspicuous, as well.

To conclude, it is somehow clear that voters and especially politicians to a certain degree recognize social media as an apt arena for political communication at the general level, while at the practical level they – especially voters – prefer conventional arenas. However, a relatively large share of both groups recognize the political communicative role of social media.

To further explore voters’ and politicians’ perception of social media, we carried out a factor analysis of the five statements as presented in Table 1 for both actors. The principal components factor analysis of both indicator sets returns only one factor with an associated eigenvalue greater than one. This means that the data reveal a one-dimensional consideration of social media for both voters and politicians. We call it *a political/non-political dimension*.

Moreover, a reliability test (Cronbach’s alpha) shows a high degree of internal consistency of the indicator sets, which means that the five items measure the same concept (Tavakol & Dennick 2011). However, the Cronbach’s alpha is slightly greater

for the politicians than for the voters (0.803 vs. 0.793), indicating that the politicians are clearer in their assessment of social media as a political rather than a non-political platform than the voters are.

The further analysis of voters' and politicians' perception of social media will be based on the one-dimensional understanding of social media along a political/non-political dimension. Based on the indicator set consisting of the five statements, we have constructed two 10-point indexes – one for the voters and one for the politicians. High index values indicate an understanding of social media as a useful political platform, whereas low values mean that this is not the case. Respondents who responded to at least three of the five statements are included in the index construction and missing values are replaced by the average of the valid values. Table 2 presents each 10-point index using *descriptive statistics*.

Table 2. *Index Measuring the Perception of Social Media along a Political/non-political Dimension, Voters and Politicians. Descriptive statistics*

	Voters*				Politicians*			
	Mean	Std. deviation	Skewness	N	Mean	Std. deviation	Skewness	N
Index	4.87	2.135	0.226	1001	5.60	2.095	-0.006	746

*Minimum and maximum is 1 and 10, respectively.

Looking at the results in Table 2, it is worth noting that the index_{voters} is slightly right-skewed and has a mean below 5, while the index_{politicians} has a mean higher than 5 and is only very slightly left-skewed. This means that the politicians in general and to a greater degree recognize the role of social media as a platform for political communication.

In the next section, we explore possible explanations of voters' and politicians' views of social media.

Explanation of the Perceptions: The Significance of Individual Characteristics

In the previous section, we showed that voters' and politicians' views on social media are rather similar, but also different in some ways. The question that remains to be explored is what explains voters' and politicians' respective views on social media. Based on the two indexes, index_{voters} and index_{politicians}, we carry out regression analyses to find out whether certain demographic, socioeconomic, politics-related factors have an impact on opinions about social media as a platform for political communication. The rationale for choosing these specific background variables rests on earlier media research in general and research on political use of social media in particular (cf. previous paragraph).

Table 3 shows the results of two regression analyses (OLS) carried out separately for voters and politicians. Model 1 shows the extent to which demographic and socioeconomic variables affect opinions of social media as a political platform. In addition to these background variables, ICT competence is included in Model 2, as it could affect how one views new technology. Model 3 shows the significations of attributes of voters and politicians, respectively. The voter-specific variables measure political interest and participation (General political interest and Participation in the local election 2011 (voted/not voted)), and political use of the Internet (Use of the Internet as an information

channel during the local election campaign). The politician-specific variables measure the politicians' familiarity with social media in a political setting (Use of social media with a private profile in the election campaign 2011), and whether the politicians have a specific focus on young voters.

Table 3. *What Explains the View on Social Media as a Political Platform? Unstandardized B-coefficient (OLS)^a*

	Index _{voters}			Index _{politicians}		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Constant	5.060	4.569	4.698	3.799	3.302	2.840
Gender ^b	0.470**	0.559**	0.576**	0.527**	0.530**	0.494**
Age ^c	-0.024**	-0.013**	-0.011*	-0.035**	-0.030**	-0.015*
Education level ^{e,i}	-0.168	-0.335**	-0.331**	0.405**	0.345*	0.387**
Household Income ^f	0.022	-0.001	-0.008	0.151*	0.135*	0.150**
ICT competence ^{d,i}		0.454**	0.411**		0.311*	0.236
Political interest ^g			-0.133			
Voted in the local election 2011 ^h			0.020			
Used often the internet as an information channel during the local election campaign 2011 ⁱ			0.234**			
Used social media with a private profile in the local election campaign 2011 ^j						1.122**
A specific focus on young voters ^k						0.501**
<i>Adjusted-R²</i>	<i>0.040</i>	<i>0.062</i>	<i>0.066</i>	<i>0.079</i>	<i>0.084</i>	<i>0.154</i>

N_{voter} = 928 N_{politician} = 710

**Significant at 1%-level

*Significant at 5%-level

^aA control for multicollinearity shows that the independent variables are linearly independent (Tolerance > 0.20).

^b0=male, 1=female.

^cCentralized continuous variable

^d0=very bad, 1=bad, 2=good, 3=very good

^e0=no education, 1=primary and secondary school, 2=upper secondary school, 3=college/university

^fSix-scale variable, 0=0-199.999 NOK, 5=more than 1.000.000 NOK

^g0=no interest, 1=small interest, 2=some interest, 3=much interest

^h0=no, 1=yes

ⁱ0=never, 1=seldom, 2=at least once a week, 3=every day

^j0=no, 1=yes

^k0=no, 1=yes

^lThe distribution on the variable is somewhat skewed: very few respondents (voters and politicians) actually have a low value.

Before going into detail, it is worth mentioning that the adjusted R-squares suggest that the explained variance is considerably greater when the politician-specific variables are introduced into the politician analysis, but only slightly greater when voter-specific

variables are introduced. For voters, it is the inclusion of ICT competence that has the greatest significance for the explained variance.

Starting with the specific variables for voters and politicians in Model 3, we find some interesting results given the debate on the validity of the reinforcement hypothesis. First of all, the analysis reveals that political interest and participation in an election have no significant influence on voters' opinions of social media. One implication of this is that social media as an arena for political communication do not "repel" people with high or low interest. In that sense social media may contribute to overcoming the reinforcement effect. The only significant effect on voters' perceptions comes from the issue of whether voters frequently used the Internet as an information channel during the election campaign. When controlled for other relevant conditions, we see that high-frequency users are most likely to consider social media as an apt platform for political communication. This is not a surprise in light of previous research showing that experience with the communication medium is a strong predictor of the perception of its richness (Carlsson & Zmud 1999).

When it comes to the politicians, it is clear that social media use in the election campaign and an explicit focus on young voters increase the tendency to consider social media as a political platform of current interest. The last point, i.e. focusing on young voters, brings us to the significance of the background variables, as it "speaks to" the result that young more than old voters tend to consider social media in the same way. Moreover, the analyses confirm the significance of age, although not only directly but also indirectly through the specific group variables (cf. the weaker, but still significant effect in Model 3). The effect of age on voters' and politicians' perception implies a somewhat greater tendency for young people to judge social media as a useful platform for political communication.

Unlike previous research on the political use of social media, our analyses show that female voters and politicians are indeed more likely to assess social media as a relevant arena for political communication than their male counterparts are. This is the case even when controlling for other factors. Two explanations of this gender discrepancy are possible. We know that, in absolute numbers, Norwegian women are bigger users of social media in general when including Facebook than men are, and women may therefore be more familiar with social media as an information and communication tool at the everyday level. The thought is, however, that women's experience with social media in everyday communication informs their view of social media as an apt arena for political communication. Furthermore, even if we know that Norwegian women are not as visible as men are in public debates due to lower active participation, we also know that this is not synonymous with being absent. Women's use of the media may be more passive, as "listeners" to the political debates on social media sites, giving them another frame of reference against which to assess the aptness of social media in a political context.

Moreover, the results in Table 3 indicate that while household income has no significant effect on voters' perception, in the analyses of politicians' perception, income comes in with a significant positive effect that gets stronger when controlling for the politician-specific variables; high income would seem to tally with a positive opinion about social media's potential role as a political arena. The non-significant, but negative effect of income on voters is as expected, whereas the positive effect on the politicians is somewhat surprising given the Norwegian context. However, it is not more surpris-

ing than it can be explained by the fact that politicians strong in resources have better opportunities to use more channels – a kind of digital divide factor.

Regarding the two variables related to knowledge – highest education level and ICT competence – the analyses document clear differences between voters and politicians. First, education level has a significant effect on both groups, but it is opposite; politicians with high education levels consider social media to be a more relevant arena for political communication than their counterparts with fewer educational achievements do, while the opposite is the case for voters, where the less well educated have a tendency to be slightly more positive. The discrepancy may be related to the conclusion in previous Norwegian research that social media do mobilize new voters in politics who often use this platform only for political communication, while social media are often used as a supplement among politicians with plenty of resources, but rarely among politicians with fewer resources.

Unlike education level, the effect direction of ICT competence is similar for voters and politicians – positive; high ICT competence promotes a view of social media as an apt arena for political communication. However, it is only for voters the effect is significant when controlled for group-specific variables. This indicates that the effect for the politicians is of more an indirect character – though still real. However, it may also indicate that, independent of their technological skills, most politicians recognize the political communicative role of social media. This is particularly the case for politicians focusing on young voters, using social media themselves, or merely because it is politically correct to do so in light of “social forces such as others’ attitudes and symbolic cues” (Treviño, Webster & Stein 2000: 164). The fact that the effects of education level and ICT competence have opposite directions explains why the negative effect of education becomes stronger (significant) when controlling for ICT competence (Model 2).

Conclusions:

A Potential Arena for Overcoming the Reinforcement Effect

In the present article, we have focused on social media and politicians’ and voters’ perceptions of them as an arena for political communication. We have used the technological frames model as our reference point. That is, we give credence to the argument that “an understanding of people’s interpretations of a technology is critical to understanding their interaction with it” (Orlikowski & Gash 1994: 175). Moreover, we assume that before social media can provide a significant platform for political communication between voters and politicians, both groups must see social media as an appropriate vehicle for such communication, and expect them to function as such. Similar arguments are widespread in the literature focusing on more traditional media as well (Treviño, Webster & Stein 2000, Kioussis 2001, Jarvenpaa & Staples 2000).

Our analysis shows that many voters and politicians see social media in general as an appropriate platform for political communication, and expect them to function as such. This would seem to corroborate expectations of the potential of social media to serve as a shared arena for both voters and politicians, but contrasts with much of the previous research on actual use of social media in our democracies. However, although in the overall picture voters’ and politicians’ perceptions of social media are not that dissimilar along a political/non-political dimension, politicians are more likely than

voters to recognize the role of social media as an apt platform for political communication. This may be related to different views on the power and richness of social media, as well as different views on “usefulness” given the different roles of the two groups in a political context: Politicians act strategically based on their belief in the power of social media, while voters are more concerned about the practical aspects (Cohen, Tsfaty & Sheafer 2008). Moreover, even if many voters and politicians recognize the potential political communicative role of social media, it is not without provisos. These provisos are related to a preference for more conventional arenas for political communication, such as newspapers and face-to-face meetings. We interpret this finding as a sign of “want it all” mentality as opposed to an “either/or” mentality.

Now, on the other hand, what is interesting in light of the discourse on the democratic potential of new media is that the analyses indicate that social media may function as arenas for overcoming some aspects of the reinforcement effect in the political sphere, meaning that social media do not reinforce common democratic divides: Some groups of voters who are often not very visible in political communication – females, young people, less well educated people – have a greater tendency to perceive social media as an apt arena for political communication. Furthermore, we find, in contrast with research on new media use, that political interest is of no significance for such perception (Kim, Wyatt & Katz 1999). These findings are suggestive, because they indicate that social media, unlike more conventional media, may have the potential to become arenas for political mobilization among groups that traditionally are left out of or at least are less visible in political arenas. This is an optimistic conclusion that contrasts with much of the research, but confirmed nonetheless by data on perceptions of social media from a frontrunner – Norway – in the diffusion and use of new technologies in general and social media in particular in everyday communication.

Notes

1. Found using Google or through the political parties.
2. For details, see Seggaard (2013).
3. Thanks to Atle Henum Haugsgjerd for assisting with the statistical analyses.

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