Joint Research Proposal COST Action 'Transforming Audiences, Transforming Societies':

**Twitter and the public sphere - The European elections in 2014**

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**Project outline**

This research collaboration will investigate the changing role of the media in the context of political communication and elections. Mass media have traditionally functioned as the intermediary between society and political institutions. The rise of social media, however, offers the potential for both politicians and citizens to circumvent the media, and directly influence each other. This process results in the emergence of a networked public sphere, in which citizens but also the journalists, political elites and other stakeholders can actively participate in public discourse. The proposed research employs agenda-setting theory, a framework often used in election campaign research that enables us to explore the changing relationship between the media, political elites and citizens. We combine traditional agenda-setting theory with a network analysis approach in order to capture the potential and impact of social media for political communication.

The central question underpinning the proposed research is an investigation of what characterizes the dynamics between traditional mass media and social media in political communication and agenda setting, and how this impacts the public sphere and the relationship between media, politics and society. By framing the research around an analysis of social media communications during the 2014 European elections from a cross-national perspective, we will investigate (a) how political elites use social media for online election campaigning and (b) how and to what extent social media have an impact on communication flows and power relationships between journalists, political elites, and the public.

Although a number of studies have investigated agenda-setting in relation to the political blogosphere, we opt for a case study around Twitter and the public sphere. Twitter is not only one of the most popular and well-known platforms for micro-blogging, it is also a social media platform that provides interesting opportunities for online campaigning and
deliberation. In addition, given the ‘open’ character of Twitter, data collection and archiving of tweets can easily be organized.

As the 2014 European elections offer a unique opportunity to engage in European cross-national research, we would like to invite interested COST members from EU member states to join this research project by adopting the proposed means of data collection and data analysis.

**Research flow and methodology**

*Data collection:*

Prior to the project, relevant hashtags (#) are identified that will be used to cover the communication on the European elections. An automated computer script will be devised, running in a (local) server environment, to log tweets containing these hashtags. The messages will be stored in a database. Likewise, follower connections and public profile data are stored as well. Relevant users are filtered for further analysis. Prominent representatives of the different national ‘Twitterspheres’ will be selected on the basis of two filters: First, Twitter users who posted a substantial amount of tweets on the elections will be retained, irrespective of their amount of followers. Second, Twitter users with a considerable follower base are included in the analysis, regardless of the amount of political tweets.

*Analysis procedure:*

The selected users are allocated to non-exclusive categories, reflecting their status within the public sphere. Likely possibilities are (a) journalists, (b) politicians, and (c) citizens, although supplementary categories might emerge during the analysis procedure. Next, the selected users' tweets are thematically analyzed (quantitative coding), focusing on message discourses. In a final stage, the gathered platform data, as well as the coded information on messages and users are incorporated in a formal social network analysis. This analysis will allow understanding Twitter's role in the public sphere by revealing structural relations, communication flows and the contents of that communication.
Prerequisites:

- Infrastructure to log platform data (Local or remote server environment able to run the provided scripts and database structure. A dedicated computer running the freeware packages WAMP of MAMP would do fine). Hence, very little technical equipment is required. Local IT support should be able to set this up rather quickly.
- Social network analysis software (Most likely UCINET, available at about $150). A basic understanding of this methodology is required, although we aim to help each other out and devise a detailed analysis protocol. Perhaps (informal) joint workshops could be organized.

Funding

There is no specific funding for this project. We encourage participants to address local research councils for applying for funding. Nevertheless, the costs of gathering data and data-analysis are kept to a minimum. In addition, this collaboration can potentially result in joint application of EU funding (given the topic of investigation).

Provisional timeline

- Deadline to mark intention: **No later than the beginning of October 2012** (contact one of the initiators – see contact details below)
- Introduction meeting: Cost Meeting at Tampere, April 2013
- Deadline tool development and participant test runs: November 2013
- Data collection: February-August 2014
- Analysis and report: January 2015
About the initiators

In recent years, the research group for Media and ICT (MICT – www.mict.be) at Ghent University, Belgium, has gained substantial insight in the means to approach Web 2.0 platforms through API's. This led to a research project on audience perception on YouTube, combining multiple data sources and methods of analysis. This led to a series of scholarly publications, including:


The Department of Aesthetics and Communication – Media Science (http://dac.au.dk/en/) at Aarhus University, Denmark, has been involved in a number of projects working on the crossroads of new media, politics and society. This led to a series of scholarly publications, including:


The Department of Media, Cognition and Communication (http://mcc.ku.dk/) at the University of Copenhagen, Denmark, has been involved in a number of projects around the use of social media in everyday life. Stine Lomborg has published a lot on social media, in particular Twitter and blogs, and has recently edited an anthology on network analysis. A selection of publications:


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