Expectations regarding Social Media

A joint arena for voters and politicians?

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Abstract

While observers have focused on the actual political use of social media when exploring the democratic potential of new media, we know little about actors’ attitudes to these media as a platform for and means of political communication. These attitudes could well be important to understanding the actual use of social media in practice. In exploring the expectations of users the article asks whether politicians and voters view the social media as a communicative medium in a similar way, and more specifically, how far they consider social media as an apt arena for exchanging political information and communicating. We explore the questions in a Norwegian context which may prove useful as a critical case in the understanding of social media as a vehicle enabling interactive communication between voters and politicians. Using the technological frames model as our reference point we find that although in the overall picture opinions of voters and politicians to 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 such a platform. Moreover, and regarding the democratic potential of social media, the study gives reason to an indeed optimistic conclusion: social media have the potential to become arenas for political mobilization among groups that traditionally are left out of or at least are underrepresented in political arenas.

Introduction

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 allowing people to get together and develop communicative communities and social networks in a virtual public sphere (Grönlund, Strandberg & Himmelroos 2009). Social media were presumed to enable interaction between citizens and politicians, a place to discuss issues and share opinions to a far higher degree than 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 the social media could also help politicians campaigning for election to mobilize support and voters, enhancing their electoral chances in a direct way. In other words, they would be used as a channel to disperse targeted political information (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 has so far showed that the 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 the social media to widen inclusion and participation has yet to manifest itself. Political communication is still something that principally engages the already politically active (that is, offline) (Segaard & Nielsen 2013 (forthcoming), Enjolras & Segaard 2011, Lusoli 2005, Norris 2001, Sipior & Ward 2005, Torpe 2007). 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 2009b:9). “Public deliberation”, Strandberg concludes, “is generally not found online” (Strandberg 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. But although the research has given us many answers, it has not given us all. While observers have focused on the actual use of social media, we know little about actors’ attitudes to social media as a platform for and means of political communication. These attitudes could well be important to understanding the actual use of social media in practice. This because behavior arguably reflects underlying attitudes and expectations to the media as technological platforms of communication (Orlikowski & Gash 1994). The focus of this article is precisely the attitudes of voters and politicians to 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. But these different uses and attitudes to the 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 is 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 interaction and communication between politicians and voters, both groups will need to perceive the social media as a useful and effective means of communicating. In other words, if the voters primarily consider the social media as a vehicle for private conversation or entertainment, it won’t be easy for the politicians to reach voters through social media and get their message across. It’s about expectations and attitudes to social media as a practical communication tool that covers online platforms of interaction and which allows users to create and share their messages in the shape of texts, pictures, videos and links (Enjolras et al. 2013). In this study, social media are operationalized by examples such as blogs, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube and Flickr.

In exploring the expectations and attitudes of users the article asks whether politicians and voters view the social media as a communicative medium in a similar way, and more specifically, how far they consider social media as an apt arena for exchanging political information and communicating.

The point of asking these two questions is to learn whether social media are regarded an appropriate medium in the political sphere and whether they therefore can act as a common arena where politicians and voters can communicate on political issues. Doing this, the article maps voters’ and
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 this study’s analysis to reveal. After presenting the methodological design and the dependent variables, we analyze voters’ and politicians’ views towards the social media. The concluding section summarizes the main results and discusses the potential of social media as arenas where political information can be spread and politicians and voters can interact.

A framework. Previous research and expectations

Lacking previous research with a specific focus on politicians’ and voters’ attitudes to and expectations of social media, for 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” (Fazio & Towles-Schwen 1999:97). Interestingly, the MODE model adds that the process by which attitudes affect behavior can differ markedly; this proposition, however, is beyond the scope of this article to discuss. For our purposes it is sufficient to have in...
mind the model’s overall assumption of a close relationship between attitudes and actual behavior. Moreover, we base our framework not only on this general behavioral model, but also the classic work and more specific 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, each of which shares some common features. In our case, the groups are voters and politicians.

Voters and politicians may as two distinctive groups have different interpretations of social media, which are constrained by their different knowledge base, objectives, and the wider context (Orlikowski and Gash 1994: 179). Because of that, we are likely to find incongruence in technology frames between voters and politicians. Incongruence can lead to misunderstandings and difficulties interacting and communicating, Orlikowski and Gash conclude (1994:180). Congruence is, on the other side, an important condition of successful communication between voters and politicians. Given the view that politicians act strategically, we would expect to see their attitudes reflect their experiences with 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 relaying and finding political information and communicating with each other.

However, one objection to this collective perspective on voters and politicians is that they are individuals as well. We agree – and indeed argue – that technological frames are individually held in addition to be 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 we draw in this section on previous research into the actual political use of social media and formulate some expectations about the attitudes of voters and politicians to social media in a political context.

International research since Pippa Norris launched the digital divide perspective and the reinforcement hypothesis in Digital Divide. Civic Engagement, Information Poverty, and the Internet Worldwide (2001) has almost unanimously concluded that there is no reason to expect the unique democratic potential of the new media to engage broad swathes of the public to automatically manifest itself in political communication. On the contrary, political communication online happens primarily between the already politically active, and the use of new media in the political space reinforces rather than reduces existing political inequalities between different groups of citizens. (Enjolras & Segaard 2011, Lusoli 2005, Torpe 2007, Strandberg 2008, Fuller 2004, Grönlund 2004, Sipior & Ward 2005, Sullivan, Borgida, Jackson, Riedel & Oxendine 2002, Oostveen & van den Besselaar 2004). In most cases, the political active are males of middle age and older with higher socioeconomic status.
The reinforcement argument has undoubtedly proven its value, but the fact that times change – and do the available technology and people’s use of it – justifies new studies. This is especially the case in Norway because of the changes in the underlying conditions of inequality in access to and use of the new technologies. The question of accessibility is almost irrelevant in the Norwegian context (Enjolras et al. 2013: 52).

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 the social media extensively in the run-up to the 2009 national election. It got a lot of public attention, though only a minority of the voters actually visited the politicians’ blogs or examined their Facebook profiles. This finding – that politicians are more prone to use the social media than voters – was confirmed by a forthcoming Segaard and Nielsen study on election blogs during the 2011 local elections. Politicians writing election blogs are overwhelmingly male. However, when Segaard and Nielsen asked respondents about the use of social media with a private profile in the local election campaign, sex differences were not to be found among the politicians, whereas age did seem to have a significant, but negative, effect: other things equal, young politicians are more likely to use social media than senior politicians (Segaard 2013). Also politicians with a specific focus on young voters are bigger users of social media than their colleges. Furthermore and other things 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 don’t seem to matter as much (Segaard 2013). On this basis, the researchers conclude, 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 – democratization of the political campaign – is supported by Danish studies of politicians’ use of social media in political campaigns as well (Hansen & Hoff 2010: 19).

Regarding the voters and the population in general, recent Norwegian research (Enjolras & Segaard 2011) on political use of social media found a very high frequency among young people (16 –26) in the use of these media and especially Facebook. The social media are in fact operating as arenas for the exercise of active citizenship, the research concludes, though the use of social media as political tools is reserved to the few. About 10 percent of young social media users are politically active online, while 90 percent are politically inactive. And people who use one online arena for political purposes are most likely to use others as well (Enjolras et al. 2013: 119-120). Moreover, Norwegian studies find that other things being equal, the use of social media for political purposes co-varies with the level of political interest and political engagement offline (Enjolras 2013, Enjolras & Segaard 2011). But social media do mobilize new groups to get (more) involved in political interaction as well. People with little political interest grow more interested over time from using social media, especially if the forum is Facebook where female debaters are in majority. Overall, and looking across the political use of all kinds of social media, sex does not seem to matter. Compared with other arenas hosting political debate, age seems to have a negative on political participation in social media; in other words, participants tend overwhelmingly to be younger people. The effect of education varies depending on the kind of political activity on the social media. In general, education has no significant effect on the political use of social media, but it does on participation in Facebook profiles of special interest organizations and political campaigns (see appendix in Enjolras & Segaard 2011).
The effect is negative: social media users with low education have a greater tendency to be involved in this kind of activity online than users with higher education, other things being equal.

To sum up, the reinforcement hypothesis is not confirmed by the Norwegian data; the actual political use of social media does not seem to support expectations created by the digital divide perspective to any great extent (Enjolras et al. 2013: 130). However, it is still the most politically active people offline that top the use 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, regarding Norwegian voters’ political use of social media, the Norwegian research shows that the impact of sex is absent, while the effects of age and education level are more noticeable but also in a way that is inconsistent with the reinforcement argument.

We close this review of the main conclusions of previous research on the actual political use of social media by formulating what we expect voters and politicians to think about social media as a platform for political communication and interaction. In doing so we rely on the belief that the frames of social media as a new technology for political information and communication provide a background for understanding the actual behavior and use of social media:

**Socioeconomic and demographic factors:**
- In general, there are no differences among politicians and voters attributable to sex regarding attitudes to social media as an appropriate arena for political communication.
- Age has no effect on attitudes to social media among voters, and has a negative effect among politicians.
- In general, education has no influence on opinions of the social media as a political platform, but voters with lower education level have a small tendency to be slightly more positive.
- Income has no impact on attitudes to social media as a political platform.

**Voter-specific political factors:**
- Voters with greater political interest consider social media as a more appropriate political arena than voters with less political interest, but the difference is smaller than the reinforcement argument would suggest.
- Voters who often use the internet as a political debate and information arena are more positive to social media as a political platform, than voters who do not use the internet this way.

**Politician-specific political factors:**
- Politicians with a specific interest in reaching young voters consider social media as a more appropriate political arena than politicians who don’t focus on young voters.
- Politicians who used their private social media profile in the local election campaign 2011 are more positive to social media as a political platform, than politicians who did not use a social medium with a private profile in that way.

The research referred to here and in general focuses on actors’ actual use of social media in a political context and tries to explain that use by demographic, socioeconomic and political factors. The conclusions and knowledge derived from the research are important for understanding how social media function de facto. But as mentioned, the research does not shed light on some of the more fundamental aspects of the question: the political use of social media may be conditional on actors’ opinions of social media as a platform for information and communication. Previous research therefore fails to show whether the non-realization of the touted democratic benefits of social media is due to the actors having different attitudes to social media. If social media are going to be a significant platform for political information and interaction between politicians and voters, both groups of actors need to recognize the social media as such a platform. This article attempts to remedy this shortage.
Methodological design and the dependent variables

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 standing for election at the municipal and/or county level in the region of Sogn and Fjordane and had a publicly 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. The second data set comes from the Local Democracy Survey 2011 (LDS 2011), a representative population survey (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 per cent of all respondents in the LDS 2011.

The study uses a battery of five statements to measure voters’ and politicians’ attitudes to social media as a platform for political information and communication (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 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 statement 1.

Table 1. Statements measuring attitudes toward social media as a political platform.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NO.</th>
<th>Statement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Social media are important platforms in political election campaigns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Social media are chiefly platforms for private conversations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Social media are more apt for entertainment than for political debate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>I prefer to participate on hustings rather than to debate in social media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5a</td>
<td>I prefer to write a letter to a newspaper rather than posting a letter on social media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5b</td>
<td>I prefer to read a politician’s letter in a newspaper than the social media</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

To explore the explanations of voters’ and politicians’ expectations to and opinions of social media we rely for our analysis on an index consisting of the five statements. The indexing is justified by a principal components factor analysis for both the voters and the politicians. Factor analysis is methodological justifiable because of the relatively high correlation among the variables used in the battery of statement and the fact that the KMO is higher than 0.7 for both data sets. The results of a principal components factor analysis for voters as well as for politicians are presented in Table 2.
The principal components factor analysis of both indicator sets returns only one factor with associated eigenvalue greater than one.\textsuperscript{vi} We assess it to be acceptable to include all five variables in the factor even if the loading on one of them is lower than .700. The assessment is based on the substantial relevance of this variable – it is very explicit about social media as a political arena – and the fact that the loading in both data sets is very close to the recommended request (.700). This means that the data reveal a one-dimensional consideration of social media for both voters and politicians. We call it a \textit{political/non-political dimension}. Looking more specifically at the factor loadings, it is relatively clear that the differences between the voters and politicians are small. As shown in Table 2, the returned factor explains more than 50 percent of the variation of each indicator set. However, the explained variation is slightly greater for the politicians than the voters, in other words, the politicians are more conscious of the political capacity of social media as a political rather than a non-political platform for information and communication than the voters are.

The analysis of voters’ and politicians’ conception of social media will be based on the one factor indicating a one-dimensional understanding of social media along a political/non-political dimension.\textsuperscript{vii} 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 an apt 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.\textsuperscript{viii} Table 3 presents each 10-point index by descriptive statistics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. Principal components factor analysis. Factor loadings</th>
<th>Voters</th>
<th>Politicians</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Factor</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Social media are important platforms in political election campaigns (recoded)\textsuperscript{a}</td>
<td>.661</td>
<td>.680</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Social media are chiefly platforms for private conversations</td>
<td>.700</td>
<td>.757</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Social media are more apt for entertainment than for political debate</td>
<td>.817</td>
<td>.791</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 I prefer to participate on hustings rather than to debate in social media</td>
<td>.750</td>
<td>.737</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5a I prefer to write a letter to a newspaper rather than posting a letter on social media</td>
<td>.774</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5b I prefer to read a politician’s letter in a newspaper than the social media</td>
<td>.764</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associated eigenvalue</td>
<td>2.742</td>
<td>2.802</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per centage of total variance explained</td>
<td>54.834</td>
<td>56.042</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{a}The values of statement 1 are recoded in accordance with statements 2-5b; a high value therefore indicates a view of social media as an integral political arena for voters and politicians, while a low value means that the respondent does not consider social media to be an appropriate political platform.

After further analysis, both residual variables are found to reflect a normal distribution and that a linear model suits the data.\textsuperscript{ix} Taken together, the statistics justify the use of the two indexes as dependent variables in regression analyses. We perform regression analyses to explore possible
explanations of voters’ and politicians’ views of social media. We do this in the last part of the analysis.

**Analyses. Social media as an apt arena for political information and communication?**

In this section, we hope to answer whether politicians and voters who consider social media as a communicative medium do so 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 try to get an understanding of the attitudes and identify the factors that determine the expectation of social media as an apt arena for political information and communication by analyzing these specific views in light of central background factors at the level of the individual. The point of departure is the hypothesis formulated earlier.

**Voters’ and politicians’ attitudes**

Social media can only be an arena where both politicians and voters can interact and communicate with each other if both actors actually consider these media as an appropriate platform for political talk – an apt arena in the political sphere.

Before analyzing each of the five statement measuring attitudes to social media, it is worth recalling what we mentioned in relation to Table 2: it seems like voters and politicians are not so unlike each other in their understanding of social media along a political/non-political dimension. However, and in accordance with Table 3, it is also 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 political platform for information and communication. Moreover, deviation among politicians is smaller than among voters which indicates that politicians are a more homogenous group at least with regard to views of the social media.

To clarify voters’ and politicians’ attitudes further, we take a closer look at the five statements and the correlations between them. We start with some simple frequency distributions as presented in Figure 1.
Looking at the frequencies in Figure 1 the overall picture is that voters and politicians share many of the same attitudes to 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 more likely in general to see the social media as a platform for political information, communication, and interaction. More than 80 percent of politicians agree that social media are important in election campaigns, while the figure for voters is 67 percent. A majority of both groups are therefore cognizant of the role of social media in a political context. 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 useful tool for political information and communication.

When confronted with two other popular ways of understanding social media – as an arena for private conversations and entertainment – slightly fewer than 50 per cent of the politicians, but 55–61 percent of the voters agree that social media are better for these purposes. However, a big minority of both groups does not agree, and the percentages that agree are small relative to the percentages that recognize the importance of social media in politician election campaigns.

Regarding the more practical attitudes and how voters and politicians actually prefer to be informed and participate in political activities, 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. When it comes to the use of newspapers versus social media, a significant smaller share of the politicians prefer to write a letter
to a newspaper (58%) than the voters who prefer to read letters to the editor (58 vs. 76 percent) – 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 the voters that disagree with the statement is relatively big (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 of social media as an integrative political arena. However, the differences are relatively small and the proportion of voters and politicians that are more guarded in their praise is conspicuous, as well. One conclusion to be drawn is that voters and politicians recognize the potential of social media as an integrative arena in the political sphere, but not without provisos.

It can be argued that the statements 1, 2, and 3 are more theoretical and general in character, while statements 5 and 4 are more practical as they refer to the respondents’ preferences regarding their own participation. In this way, the data highlight a principled and a practical attitude to social media respectively, even when we would expect a correlation between these two kinds of attitude.

A closer look at the correlations of the five statements in Table 4 clearly confirms the close and significant relationship between all of the statements found by the factor analysis. What is more interesting is that the correlation matrix reveals that the correlations between the two variables that are indented to measure a practical attitude (statements 5 and 4) are considerably higher than the other correlations, and highest for the voters than for the politicians (0.615 versus 0.582). The data would therefore seem to suggest that it is meaningful to distinguish between a principled and a practical attitude to the role of social media in the political sphere. It also shows that voters’ attitudes are the opposite of the politicians’, in relying to a greater extent on a practical rather than a principled approach.
Table 4. Correlation Matrix. Voters (the right corner) and Politicians (the left corner). Pearson’s’ R

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. Social media are important platforms in political election campaigns (recoded)*</th>
<th>2. Social media are chiefly platforms for private conversations</th>
<th>3. Social media are more apt for entertainment than for political debate</th>
<th>4. I prefer to participate on hustings rather than to debate in social media</th>
<th>5a. I prefer to write a letter to a newspaper rather than posting a letter on social media</th>
<th>5b. I prefer to read a politician’s letter in a newspaper rather than the social media</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Social media are important platforms in political election campaigns (recoded)*</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.441**</td>
<td>0.427**</td>
<td>0.302**</td>
<td>0.309**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Social media are chiefly platforms for private conversations</td>
<td>0.458**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.508**</td>
<td>0.308**</td>
<td>0.359**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Social media are more apt for entertainment than for political debate</td>
<td>0.433**</td>
<td>0.548**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.494**</td>
<td>0.517**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I prefer to participate on hustings rather than to debate in social media</td>
<td>0.307**</td>
<td>0.371**</td>
<td>0.468**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.615**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5a. I prefer to write a letter to a newspaper rather than posting a letter on social media</td>
<td>0.365**</td>
<td>0.433**</td>
<td>0.504**</td>
<td>0.582**</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5b. I prefer to read a politician’s letter in a newspaper rather than the social media</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** Significant at 1% level

*The values of statement 1 are recoded in accordance with statements 2-5b; a high value therefore indicates a view of social media as an integral political arena for voters and politicians, while a low value means that the respondent does not consider social media to be an appropriate political platform.

### Explanation of the attitudes

In the previous section we showed that voters’ and politicians’ views of the social media as an appropriate or non-appropriate political arena are rather similar, but also different in some ways. The question that remains to be explored is what explains voters’ and politicians’ respective views of the social media. We take the expectations formulated on the basis of previous research which explores the importance of demographic, socioeconomic, politics-related factors as our points of departure. More specifically and based on the two indexes, index\textsubscript{voters} and index\textsubscript{politicians} measuring the attitudes to social media along a political/non-political dimension, we carry out regression analyses to find out whether certain factors have an impact on opinions of social media as an apt platform for political information and communication.
Table 5 shows the results of two regression analyses (OLS) carried out separately for voters and politicians. Model one 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 1 since it could affect how one views new technology. Model two 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 Internet (The use of 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 5. What causes the view on social media as a political platform? Unstandardized B-coefficient (OLS)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Index Voters</th>
<th>Index Politicians</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Model one</td>
<td>Model Two</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>4.569</td>
<td>4.698</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>-0.559**</td>
<td>-0.576**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-0.013**</td>
<td>-0.011*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICT competence</td>
<td>0.454**</td>
<td>0.411**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education level</td>
<td>-0.335**</td>
<td>-0.331**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household Income</td>
<td>-0.001</td>
<td>-0.008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political interest</td>
<td>-0.133</td>
<td>0.020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voted in the local</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>election 2011</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Used often the</td>
<td>0.234**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>internet as an</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>information channel</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>during the local</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>election campaign</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Used social media</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>with a private</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>profile in the local</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>election campaign</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A specific focus on</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>young voters</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.062</td>
<td>0.066</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Significant at 1%-level
*Significant at 5%-level

Nvoter=928 Npolitician=710

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

b=0=male, 1=female.

c=Centralized continuous variable

d=0=very bad, 1=bad, 2=good, 3=very good

e=0=no education, 1=primary and secondary school, 2=upper secondary school, 3=college/university

f=Six-scale variable, 0=0-199.999 NOK, 5=more than 1.000.000 NOK

g=0=no interest, 1=small interest, 2=some interest, 3=much interest

h=0=no, 1=yes

i=0=never, 1=seldom, 2=at least once a week, 3=at least once a week

j=0=never, 1=yes

k=0=never, 1=yes
Before going into detail, it is worth mentioning that the adjusted R-squares suggest that the explained variance is only slightly greater when voter-specific variables are introduced (model two) in the voter analysis, but considerably greater when the politician-specific variables are introduced into the politician analysis – it rises from 8.4 to 15.4 percent.

Regarding the significance of the background variables, model one in both analyses shows that all variables except the household income variable in the voter analysis, have a significant effect on attitudes towards social media, other things being equal. This indicate that attributes such as sex, age-group, or voter/politician with high ICT competence increase the tendency to recognize social media as a relevant and appropriate arena for political information and communication. However, the effect of education among voters is the opposite of its effect for politicians: negative in the former case, positive in the latter. Household income seems only to have an effect for the politicians, not for the voters. The effect is positive, meaning that politicians in the high income bracket, all things equal, have a stronger tendency to view social media as a feasible political platform, than politicians in the lower bracket. Moving from model one to model two, introducing the group specific variables does not change the general picture. However, the significance of age for both voters and politicians is smaller, but still significant. Furthermore, in the politician analysis the significant effect of ICT competence disappears, while the significant effects of education and income are strengthened after controlling for the politician-specific variables in model two.

Our findings regarding the significance of the background variables require some comments. Unlike previous research on the political use of social media which indicates no difference between the sexes, our regression analyses show that female voters and politicians are more likely to assess social media as a relevant arena for political communication than their male counterparts. Two explanations of this discrepancy are possible. We know that in absolute numbers Norwegian women are bigger users of social media in general than men, and women may therefore be more familiar with social media as an information and communication tool at the everyday level. The thought is though, that women’s experience with social media in everyday communication informs their view of social media as an apt arena for political communication and interaction. Furthermore, even if we know that Norwegian women are not as visible as men 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. While household income has no effect on voters’ attitudes, in the analyses of politicians’ attitudes, income comes in with a significant positive effect; high income would seem to tally with a positive opinion of social media’s potential role as a political arena. The non-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 surprising that it can be explained by the digital divide perspective, as described earlier.

Regarding the two variables related to knowledge – highest education level and ICT competence – the analyses found a difference between voters and politicians that is even bigger than expected. Given the actual political use of social media, we expected no general impact from education on respondents’ opinion of social media as a political platform, but less well educated voters do have a small tendency to be slightly more positive. The discrepancy is related to the effect of education on politicians. While education level\textsuperscript{th} has a significant negative effect for the voters, the opposite is the
case for politicians, even when controlled for other variables. In fact, the effect of education on politicians’ attitudes is strengthened after controlling for the specific politician variables. This means that politicians with high education levels consider social media as a more relevant arena for political communication and information than their counterparts with fewer educational achievements, other things being equal. Answering why is a question for further research.

ICT competence has a relatively strong and positive effect on voters’ attitudes to social media, but has no such effect on politicians’ attitudes when controlling for the politician-specific variables in model two. The explanation may be related to another finding: that voters’ attitudes tend to tally with a practical approach, unlike the principled or abstract frame of mind of the politicians. ICT competence has practical consequences, and will therefore have a bigger influence on a practical mindset, than on a more abstract attitude.

Turning to the specific variables for voters and politicians in model two, we find some interesting results given our expectations. Regarding the voter-specific variables, the only significant effect on opinions of the social media 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 information and communication. Variables such as general political interest and participation in the 2011 election have no such effect. That political interest and participation have no significant influence supports the conclusion of previous Norwegian research, that the reinforcement argument does not have much support in Norway.

When it comes to the politicians, it is not surprising to see 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. focus on young voters, is interesting because it “speaks to” the result that young more than old voters tend to consider social media in the same way. However, introducing the voter specific variables in model two weakens this effect of age, but it is still significant. The effect of age on voters’ attitudes is somewhat surprising in light of new Norwegian research, but not in relation to conventional wisdom and most international research, where the greater tendency of young people to judge social media as a useful platform for political communication comes as no surprise. We find the same impact from age in the politician analysis, as indeed we expected. It should be mentioned that including an independent variable that differentiates higher-ranked politicians for election has no effect on the way the politicians consider social media along a political/non-political dimension.

Conclusions. Social media as a preferred and joint arena

New information and communication technologies have become in the past few decades an increasingly urgent topic in research on political communication and democracy. One of the main focuses of scholars in the field is stakeholders’ – i.e. voters and politicians – actual use of the technologies and the question of democratic mobilization. Many researchers all over the world agree that the use of these new technologies reinforce established democratic divides rather than mobilize new groups to democratic participation. However, times change and so do people’s access to and familiarity with new information and communication technologies. This has particularly been the case in Norway where more than nine in every ten households have access to the internet and large
numbers of people use social media for everyday communication as well as political purposes. In this sense, Norway is a frontrunner and an interesting case to explore the democratic potential of new information and communication technologies.

In this article we have focused on social media and politicians’ and voters’ attitudes and expectations of them as an arena for political information and communication. We have used the technological frames model as our reference point in this study. That is, we give credence to the argument that “an understanding of people’s interpretations of a technology is critical to understanding their interaction it” (Orlikowski & Gash 1994: 175). Moreover, we assume that before social media can provide a significant platform for political interaction and communication between voters and politicians, both groups must see social media as an appropriate vehicle for such interaction and communication, and expect them to function as such.

Our analysis shows that most voters and the politicians see the social media in general as an appropriate platform for political communication and interaction, and expect them to function as such. This would seem to corroborate expectations of the potential of social media to provide as a shared arena for both voters and politicians. However, although in the overall picture opinions and perceptions of voters and politicians to 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 such a platform. This is especially the case when we compare the political use of social media with non-political use, i.e. for private conversations and entertainment. In consequence of this, we can also conclude that expectations of the social media as arenas of political communication between voters and politicians are not completely met, either.

One interesting difference between voters and politicians concerns the terms on which their attitudes are based: voters’ attitudes are more likely to tally with a practical mindset, while politician’s opinions tend to be couple with a principled or abstract mentality. In light of this it is not surprising that ICT competence – as a practical condition for using new information and communication technologies – has a positive effect on voters’ attitudes to social media as a political platform, whereas there is no such effect on politicians’ attitudes. On the other hand, and in accordance with previous Norwegian research, but in contrast to much international research on political use of new technologies, education level according to our analysis tends to have a negative effect on voters’ views of social media along a political/non-political scale; voters with lower educational achievements will have a greater tendency than voters with higher education levels to see the social media as an apt arena for political interaction. As we know that people with less education traditionally are underrepresented in many political arenas, this finding could suggest that, all things equal, the social media could provide a useful means of getting in touch with a group that is often excluded from political participation. The same can be said about female and younger voters who are more likely than male and senior voters to assess social media as an apt arena for interaction with politicians. What is perhaps even more surprising, because it contrasts with much research that supports the reinforcement argument, is that our analysis shows that the level of political interest and election participation has no significant influence on how voters rate the social media along a political/non-political dimension. Altogether, one of the main conclusions of our analysis is that social media have the potential to become arenas for political mobilization among groups that traditionally are left out of or at least are underrepresented in political arenas. It is an optimistic conclusion, but confirmed nonetheless by data on attitudes to social media from a
frontrunner in the diffusion and use of new technologies in general and social media in particular in everyday communication.

References


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1 41 percent of respondents aged 55–64 and 20 percent aged 65–75 participate in social media.

2 On other social media such as Twitter and blogs, male debaters are in majority, but because of the great diffusion of Facebook in the Norwegian population, the sex effect is absent when we look at social media in general.

3 Found by Google or through the political parties.

4 For details, see Segaard (2013).

5 The correlation coefficients are in absolute values all greater than .316 (voter) and .314 (politicians) (see Table 4., and the KMO is .788 (voter) and .801 (politicians).

6 If we accept an eigenvalue lower than one, but higher than .750, a factor analysis returns two factors that actually reflect a practical attitude and a principal attitude respectively toward social media as a political
platform. The loadings of the two variables that were indented to measure a practical based attitude – 4 and 5 – are high on one factor and low on the other, while the opposite is the case for the variables measuring the principal dimension (variables 1, 2, and 3). An exception is variable 3 in the voter analysis on which the loadings are rather similar and in-between.

Tests show a relatively high degree of reliability in both indicator sets. The Cronbach’s Alpha based on standardized items is 0.79 for the voters and 0.80 for the politicians.

This is a suitable way of handling missing values as it is based on a one-dimensional solution.

According to control for homoscedasticity and linearity.

Thanks to Atle Henum Haugsgjerd for assisting with the statistical analyses.

It should be mentioned that the distribution on the variable ‘highest education level’ is somewhat skewed: very few respondents (voters and politicians) actually have a low education level.