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Citizen Participation
and Political Communication
in a Digital World

Edited by
Alex Frame and Gilles Brachotte



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3 Ad Hoc Mini-Publics on Twitter

Citizen Participation or Political Communication? Examples from the German National Election 2013

Jessica Einspänner-Pflock, Mario Anastasiadis
and Caja Thimm

3.1 Introduction and Theoretical Background: Discursive Participation in Twitter Mini- Publics

By drawing on empirical Twitter data, this present chapter aims to assess the extent to which the microblogging platform can be seen to offer a digital public sphere for political discursive participation. It is assumed that especially during election times citizens try to engage in political discussions on Twitter (either by actively contributing or passively reading along), which are linked to wider public discourse. Twitter's technological structure enables accounts (people, organisations, institutions) to be highly interconnected, and themes, opinions and ideas to circulate rapidly. It is believed that Twitter thus offers a conducive environment for discursive participation and deliberation processes.

Tweets sent by citizens, journalists and politicians during the German National Election 2013 will be analysed, in order to examine digital discourse on Twitter during election times, the various groups of actors which are constituted and the role they play within certain discursive contexts. Those 'contexts' are conceptualised as *mini-publics*: publicly visible and publicly accessible online spaces that evolve around topics or individuals on social media platforms over a period of time and are characterised by "self-formation and self-selection" (see Chapter 11 in this volume). In the present study the concept of online mini-publics will be substantiated especially with respect to *ad hoc publics*, a particular type of mini-publics, which form and persist only for a specific period of time. Unless specified differently, the concept of ad hoc (mini-)publics are only used within the framework of the microblogging platform Twitter.

Analysing Twitter Ad Hoc Publics

On Twitter, everyone can participate in exchanges on a certain topic by actively contributing (tweeting, retweeting, favoriting, replying) or passively following the thread by reading along. Ad hoc publics characterised by a short duration and high intensity often become established *just because* users seize the opportunity to participate in an unrestrained setting for discussion.

The feature of Twitter's structural openness has led to the assumption that the microblogging platform bears the potential to enhance deliberation among the interacting individuals (Kim and Woo 2012, Bor 2013, Thimm, Dang-Anh, and Einspänner 2014). However, while critics claim that there is no room for reasonable political discourse within 140 characters, the extent of one tweet (Fuchs 2013), Twitter must not be regarded as a substitute for traditional public spheres (online or offline). Twitter should rather be seen as a new digital environment among others that holds the potential to play an important role in individuals' media repertoires. Twitter publics build spaces for interaction with an open outcome, which can but does not necessarily meet the normative conditions for deliberation. In addition, whereas other (offline-focused) approaches addressing the idea of bottom-up deliberation (Chambers 2009, Lafont 2015) exclude certain actor constellations (i.e., "campaign debates" or "citizen-to-elite-communication", Delli Carpini, Cook, and Jacobs 2004), it is considered that discussions among Twitter publics are always open to all individuals belonging to various actor groups (e.g., among politicians, journalists or a specific interest group). Even if single mini-publics on Twitter might appear exclusive with respect to the active participants involved ("ingroup-communication"), discourses in the public space of Twitter can be easily followed by others and thus also foster processes of interaction, discussion, and deliberation.

The basic structural openness of Twitter publics is closely related to the immediacy and rapid growth that particularly characterise topic-centred ad hoc formations. In comparison to other media environments where "stories must be written, edited, published and commentary pages must be set up" (Bruns and Burgess 2011), the creation of a topic-centred ad hoc public on Twitter, for example via hashtags, is easily initiated. Hashtags function as clickable keywords, which semantically and lexically refer to the respective thematic issue (exemptions might be acronyms or neologisms). By searching for specific hashtags Twitter users can detect, follow and engage in discussions on the platform. They can also create their own thematic contexts by creating a hashtag and tweeting it to the digital public. However, not every "hashtag community" (Bruns and Burgess 2011) is an ad hoc public. Mostly, ad hoc publics arise around sudden events or major breaking news. Examples are the nuclear accident in Japan or the terror attacks in Oslo in 2011, which gave rise to ad hoc publics on Twitter around the respective hashtags #Fukushima and #Oslobomb (Bruns 2012). Ad hoc publics can also form around known or announced hashtags, which is often the case with live TV events (#ESC for the Eurovision contest or #TellEurope as a name for the EU Election TV debate) or big sports events (#olympia, #superbowl).

Yet other discourses – although having a similar structure like the described hashtag communities – are not regarded as ad hoc publics, as they are prolonged and already last over several days, weeks or even months. For example the discourses around the German #s21 construction project (see Thimm in this volume) or #BER (the hashtag referring to the new Berlin

airport) form extended discourses that might be the result of an ad hoc discourse but can no longer be regarded as such, as the event in question is not recent (any more).

For the analysis and description of ad hoc publics in Twitter, the *functional operator model* (see also Thimm et al. 2012, 2014) provides an adequate framework (see Figure 3.1). The model distinguishes four levels of Twitter communication: (1) the operator level, (2) the text level, (3) the action level, and (4) the functional level. The operator level consists of the four specific semiotic signs @, RT, # and http://, which are used to perform communicative action on Twitter. By combining these operators with text (second level), like an account name, a URL, or a random phrase, the text referred to not only gets marked and becomes clickable, but the user also performs action in the Twitter universe (third level). This is accomplished either by the mechanisms of the media logic provided (and programmed) by Twitter (i.e., the fact that the combination of certain signifiers and text becomes hyperlinked within Twitter) or the specific dynamically changing appropriation techniques of the Twitter users. The functional level (fourth level) can be seen as the analytic level for interpreting the respective operator-text-action-combination and constructing its meaning.

By using the @-operator, Twitter users directly address and/or mention other users within a tweet (@-symbol + Username). This reflects on the public Twitter timeline and allows other users to find the accounts involved and possibly to extend their own personal Twitter network. The *retweet function* enables users to re-send other users' tweets, which is not only a way of citing or distributing the thoughts of others but is also seen as an acknowledgment for the originator. The #-operator is used to highlight keywords and to semantically mark tweets. The combination of the #-sign and a character string turns them into a *hashtag*. On Twitter, hashtags are essential signifiers and enable organisation and contextualisation of discourses. Finally, *hyperlinks* (strings headed by http://) allow users to substantiate arguments by implementing external content, such as photos, videos or URLs. Hyperlinks enable a connection to online content outside the "Twitter universe" and provide additional information.

The functional operator model offers the opportunity to evaluate the structures of discursive participation in mini-publics on Twitter. By integrating the model into a mixed method design of quantitative and qualitative tweet analyses it becomes easier to assess the formation and establishment of mini-publics and especially ad hoc publics. The inherent network structure of automatically linked content and user accounts enhances the connectivity between individuals and thus the spontaneous and quick development of the shared communicative space (Bruns and Burgess 2011, Maireder and Schlögl 2014).

In addition, the functional operator model provides a framework for a quantitative assessment of users' *tweeting styles*. The amount of operators employed by a Twitter user over a certain period of time can serve as a basis for interpreting his or her preferred way of tweeting. Tweeting styles can

OPERATOR LEVEL	TEXT LEVEL	ACTION LEVEL	FUNCTIONAL LEVEL
@	+ name of Twitter account	addressing, mentioning, replying	interacting, networking self-enhancement
RT	+ @ + name of Twitter account + original tweet text (+ comment)	referring, quoting, commenting, redistributing	Citing, expanding the personal network, creating attention
#	+ strings of characters, lexemes, key words, acronyms, phrases	tagging, indexing, contextualizing, emphasizing	discourse organization, tweet retrieval, ad hoc communities, commenting
http://	+ URL address, shortened URLs, other tweets, pictures ("twitpics")	illustrating, referring to other sources, tweet/content enrichment	tweet extension, substantiating argumentation, self-positioning

Figure 3.1 The functional operator model: analytic levels of Twitter communication. (Modelled after Thimm et al. 2012, 2014.)

be located on a continuum between two major categories: on the one hand the *personal-interactive tweeting style* is defined by a more frequent usage of @- and RT-operators compared to the http://-operator usage; and on the other hand the *topical-informative tweeting style* is characterised by a higher usage of hyperlinks compared to the usage of @- and RT operators (Thimm, Dang-Anh, and Einspänner 2012). It is assumed that the @- and RT-operators mainly serve as markers for interaction within one's personal follower network on Twitter whereas the hyperlink is supposed to contain additional information which helps to make more precise the meaning of a tweet. The tweeting style of a person may range between the two categories and thus be interpreted as either personal-interactive or topical-informative – or even balanced. Apart from the two main styles, the distribution of hashtags within a user's tweeting profile can be important, especially with respect to their discursive function. In this regard, a user who employs many hashtags can be seen as more participative and as providing more discursive connecting points than someone with a comparably lower usage of the hashtag operator.

3.2 Discursive Participation in Twitter Mini-Publics During the German National Election 2013

Although Germany is still lagging behind other countries regarding the number of Twitter users, the microblogging service has become more and more important as a tool for distributing news and group networking in Germany (van Eimeren and Frees 2014). For political parties and candidates, the role of Twitter as a strategic communication tool gained particular momentum during the 2013 election campaign. Ninety-five percent of the 631 elected

candidates own social media accounts, and about half of them have a Twitter account (cf. www.pluragraph.de).

The German National Election on 22 September 2013 has received wide attention on social media. Twitter itself even called for political participation by sending emails to its users and inviting them to use certain hashtags such as #geh wählen (“get out the vote”) or #btw13 (acronym for “Bundestagswahl 2013”–“National election 2013”). Twitter hence became an active player during the election by providing statistics such as charts with numbers of tweets sent by the political parties or individual candidates. In fact, the discussions that happened on Twitter during the election campaign drew attention to upcoming topics and thus even influenced the offline media agenda (Nuernbergk 2013). Although the quality of political communication on Facebook and Twitter can partially be questioned, more than one third of the voters stated in various surveys that social media would influence the electoral outcome (Kempf/Güllner 2013).

Research Questions and Method

Our empirical analysis of Twitter communication during the National Elections in Germany is led by the assumption that discursive participation in (ad hoc) mini-publics on Twitter can be evaluated by isolating certain hashtags and by looking at the usage styles of politicians. Therefore we analyse how these selected hashtags have been employed by Twitter users during the electoral period, in terms of their semantic and structural context. In addition, we look at the different actors making up Twitter mini-publics. By focusing on selected discourses we examine the way politicians contributed to these Twitter publics during the campaign. Do they engage in an exchange with citizens or rather take part merely in in-group discourse (among themselves) and thus establish their own mini-publics? How can their tweeting styles and discussion patterns be analysed and interpreted in terms of their inclusive or participatory potential?

The database consists of over 1.3 million tweets collected in the period of three weeks before and one week after Election Day (September 22, 2013). For the tweet collection, the streaming and search APIs of Twitter were used to compile the data set. The corpus contains tweets sent by selected politicians (electoral candidates of all parties and all incumbent members of the Cabinet with a Twitter profile), by the major party accounts (such as @cdu_news, @spdde, @FDP_Fraktion etc.), various media accounts (e.g., @weltonline, @tazgezwoitscher, @zeitonline etc.), and citizens addressing the respective candidates. In addition, for the concrete purpose of detecting ad hoc publics, different event-related hashtags have been collected: some of those hashtags were pre-selected on the basis of former data collections in electoral contexts (such as #wahl “election” or #tvduell); others were continuously added during the data collection as a result of a constant monitoring process.

For the addressed areas of research, the method of computer-assisted content analysis of tweets was applied. The analysis process combined quantitative as well as qualitative proportions on selected samples. With the help of QDA Miner analysis software (v.4.1) the collected tweets, the content and the operator usage were indexed and interpreted with regard to the following categories (for more on qualitative tweet analyses with computer software, see Einspänner/Dang-Anh/Thimm 2014):

- Topics and hashtags (quantitative sorting, frequency analysis, and qualitative analysis regarding their semantic contexts)
- Quantitative operator usage of selected users in order to assess the interactive or informative potential of their tweets (“tweeting styles”)
- Combined operator and content analysis of participants’ tweets in selected discussion threads in order to delineate their interactional and argumentative patterns

Hashtag-Centred Ad Hoc Publics

Before examining individual Twitter users’ (politicians’) tweeting styles and analysing their operator usage, we first focus on the specificities of hashtag-centred ad hoc publics. For illustration, the mini-publics from the present data set, related to certain hashtags, can be categorized as “event related” or related to “second screen communication”.

a) Event Related

Intensive usage of certain hashtags on Twitter during a certain point in time might be an indicator for the formation of an ad hoc public around the respective issue. Apart from the structural function of hashtags as topical anchors, hashtags are also used in order to comment, criticize, ironize or satirise topics of public interest (Dang-Anh/Einspänner/Thimm 2013). Not only but especially during election campaigns, it can be observed that topical-centred (ad hoc) publics emerge as users “invent” hashtags related to current political events.

Most attention is drawn to particularly amusing or interesting word creations (also neologisms), which have the potential for “virality”. From the hashtags in the present data set considered relevant during the 2013 election (measured by frequency rate), the hashtag #Stinkefinger (“stinkfinger”, a term used for describing the insulting hand gesture with a raised middle finger) can serve as an example for campaign related ad hoc publics: this hashtag (collected in over 3.100 tweets, cf. Figure 3.2) referred to a photo of the top candidate of the Social Democrats Peer Steinbrück, which was published in a well-known newspaper magazine (“Süddeutsche Magazin”). In answer to the question: “‘Peerlusconi’, ‘problem-peer’ and so on: you don’t have to worry about a shortage of nice nicknames, do you?”, Steinbrück simply raises his middle finger (see <http://tinyurl.com/pzounuo>). After the

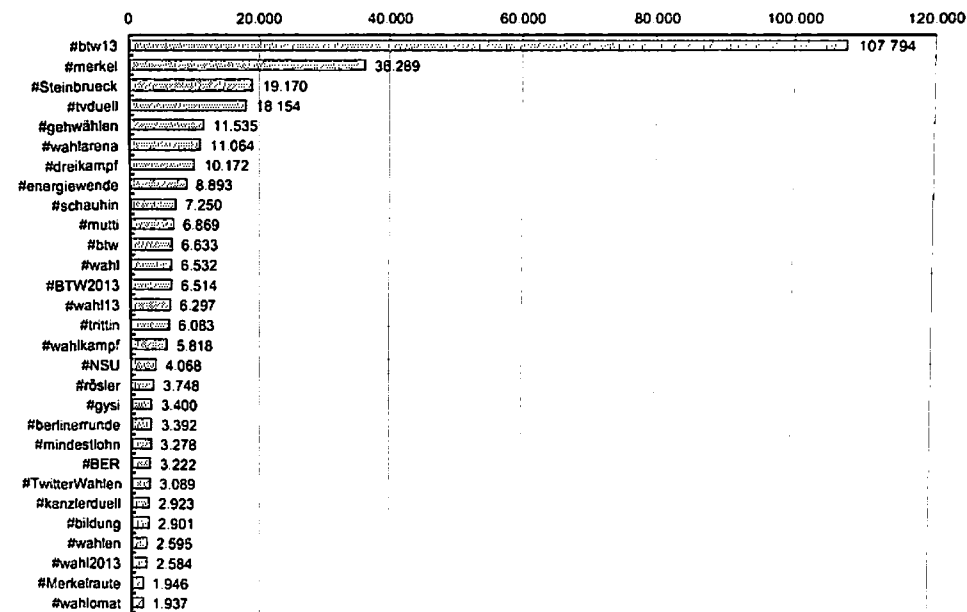


Figure 3.2 Top 20 hashtags from tweets collected during the German National Election.

publication, Twitter users started discussing the “stinkfinger-gate” by using the hashtag #Stinkefinger. Moreover, they created photomontages of the respective picture (i.e., Steinbrück showing his middle finger to the Pope, to Barack Obama or to the president of the German Bundestag),¹ which also helped the topic becoming viral and added to the ad hoc public. This issue received numerous comments in the online and offline media.

A comparison of tweets and discourses around various hashtags related to the two top candidates (Angela Merkel from the Christian Democrats and Peer Steinbrück from the Social Democrats) shows that, while the hashtag #Merkel (36,289 tweets) was mostly associated with political issues, tweets with #Steinbrueck (19,170 tweets) often referred to him as persona (see also Wladarsch, Neuberger, Brockmann and Stieglitz 2014, 467). “Stinkfinger-gate” is one example of this sort of personalisation.

b) Second Screen Communication

The practice of using Twitter on a “second screen” while following a television programme is becoming a widespread phenomenon (Buschow, Schneider, and Ueberheide 2014, Giglietto and Selva 2014). Twitter users often communicate on the microblogging platform in order to comment on the TV programme they are watching. In order to participate in the discussion on a particular TV programme, users tag their tweets with a hashtag related to the programme’s name, for example the acronym #SATC for the TV sitcom “Sex and the City”.

The formation of Twitter users discussing a particular TV event can be regarded as an ad hoc mini-public as individuals spontaneously come

together around a clearly defined issue (the TV programme) and form a small public for a defined period of time (usually the time of the broadcast). If the discussion lasts longer than the broadcast, the ad hoc mini-public might further stabilise and develop into an event-related mini-public (at least as long as it is linked to the specific hashtag).

During election times almost “foreseeable” ad hoc publics on Twitter constitute around the TV debates among the top candidates. In the German National Election 2013 two hashtags were of importance which mark the second screen communication referring to the TV debates: #tvduell and #wahlarena. The former referred to the TV debate between chancellor Angela Merkel and her challenger Peer Steinbrück. That day, 18,154 tweets containing #tvduell were collected, while on the day of the TV debate (1 September 2013) this hashtag was used in approximately 3,000 tweets during the broadcast and in over 9,000 tweets on the day after the debate. This finding indicates the relevance of Twitter as a medium for follow-up communication and points to a certain stabilisation of the ad hoc public. Similar assumptions can be made for the hashtag #wahlarena that relates to a TV show in which citizens can ask questions to the candidates. On the day of the show with Angela Merkel (September 9, 2013) 4,867 tweets were collected during the event, 2,925 tweets two days later during the show with Peer Steinbrück. About 8,000 tweets containing the hashtag #wahlarena were sent before and after the timeframe of the live events.

When analysing Twitter users’ participation in these ad hoc publics during the political TV events, one finding is particularly interesting: a lot of users used the hashtags #TVduell or #wahlarena as tags besides other election related hashtags. For example, on September 11th user @Dunya_Balu tweeted: “I can’t help being more and more in favour of Steinbrück, the longer the campaign goes on! #wahlarena #btw13” (“Ich komme ja nicht umher, je länger Wahlkampf ist, Steinbrück immer besser zu finden! #wahlarena #btw13”). In this tweet, the user admits that her opinion about Peer Steinbrück becomes increasingly positive – apparently due to the candidate’s presentation in the TV show “wahlarena” (marked by the respective hashtag). The Twitter user indicates that she is watching the show “wahlarena” and thus presents herself as being politically interested. By using #btw13 additionally, the tweet gets clustered in the broader context of the National Election 2013.

3.3 Analysing Discussion Patterns in Twitter Ad Hoc Publics: Politicians’ Tweeting Styles

By extending Thimm’s definition of ad hoc mini-publics as “reactions to incidents of all kinds” (cf. Chapter 11 in this volume) it is assumed that ad hoc publics on Twitter may also form around discussions, which are not necessarily marked by hashtags but by the network coherence created by the usage of @-operators between the participants. By analysing the tweeting styles of selected politicians we will discuss in what respect politicians’ use of Twitter might play a role in the creation of (ad hoc) mini-publics.

Among the most active tweeting politicians during the German national election 2013 are eight members of the Green Party (“Bündnis 90/Die Grünen”), eight members of the Social Democrats (“SPD”), seven members of the Left wing party (“Die Linke”), four members of the Free Democrats (“FDP”) and three members of the Christian Democrats (“CDU”) (cf. Table 3.1).

Table 3.1 Top 30 of the most active members of the German parliament on Twitter during the 2013 election

<i>Politician</i>	<i>Account</i>	<i>Political Party</i>	<i>Tweets Sent</i>	<i>Tweets Received by others</i>	<i>Retweeted</i>	<i>Overall Twitter activity</i>
Renate Künast	@RenateKuenast	B90/Die Grünen	542	1354	1459	3355
Oliver Luksic	@OlliLuksic	FDP	516	223	518	1257
Eva Högl	@EvaHoegl	SPD	435	719	690	1844
Ulrich Kelber	@UlrichKelber	SPD	418	1037	1293	2748
Steffi Lemke	@SteffiLemke	B90/Die Grünen	349	846	1424	2619
Peter Altmaier	@peteraltmaier	CDU	316	4510	2834	7660
Monika Lazar	@monikalazar	B90/Die Grünen	315	NA	408	723
Patrick Kurth	@Patrick_Kurth	FDP	266	473	525	1264
Elke Ferner	@Elke_Ferner	SPD	242	137	374	753
Volker Wissing	@Wissing	FDP	229	398	621	1248
Petra Sitte	@Petra_Sitte_MdB	Die Linke	182	138	210	530
Burkhard Lischka	@LischkaB	SPD	178	130	240	548
Tabea Rößner	@TabeaRoessner	B90/Die Grünen	163	172	309	644
Jan Mücke	@jan_muecke	FDP	141	NA	177	318
Bärbel Höhn	@BaerbelHoehn	B90/Die Grünen	136	337	354	827
Peer Steinbrück	@peersteinbrueck	SPD	131	13814	11525	25470
Sabine Leidig	@SabineLeidig	Die Linke	126	129	370	625
Diana Golze	@GolzeMdB	Die Linke	106	22	75	203
Katja Kipping	@katjakipping	Die Linke	106	590	1327	2023
Gabriel Sigmar	@sigmargabriel	SPD	82	3194	2779	6055
Manfred Grund	@manfred_grund	CDU	71	51	67	189

<i>Politician</i>	<i>Account</i>	<i>Political Party</i>	<i>Tweets Sent</i>	<i>Tweets Received by others</i>	<i>Retweeted</i>	<i>Overall Twitter activity</i>
Dr. Harald Terpe	@terpeundteam	B90/Die Grünen	70	33	53	156
Florian Pronold	@FlorianPronold	SPD	67	149	163	379
Carsten Schneider	@schneidercar	SPD	61	102	108	271
Heike Brehmer	@HeikeBrehmerMdB	CDU	59	44	23	126
Gregor Gysi	@GregorGysi	Die Linke	56	3353	4083	7492
Jan van Aken	@jan_vanaken	Die Linke	50	110	354	514
Sahra Wagenknecht	@SWagenknecht	Die Linke	46	745	549	1340
Kerstin Andreae	@kerstinandreae	B90/Die Grünen	39	191	236	466
Luise Amtsberg	@Luise_Amtsberg	B90/Die Grünen	25	66	40	131

Two politicians, Peter Altmaier (Christian Democrats CDU) and Renate Künast (the Greens), have been chosen to illustrate the candidates' tweeting styles during the 2013 election campaign. Renate Künast, top candidate for the Greens in Berlin, sent the most tweets during the evaluation period (542 tweets – more than nineteen tweets per day). Peter Altmaier, the Federal Minister of the Environment, is the candidate who received the most tweets during the evaluation period (4,510 tweets) apart from the major parties' top candidates like Peer Steinbrück from the Social Democrats (Angela Merkel from the Christian Democrats doesn't have a Twitter account). This makes Altmaier's tweets an interesting issue for analysis, especially with regards to question of how interactive and dialogical this politician acts on Twitter. The two politicians' Twitter operator usage will be analysed on the one hand in order to find out if their primary tweeting style is more informative or rather interactive and dialogical. On the other hand, a qualitative tweet analysis will shed light on the politicians' ways to structure arguments and participate in the digital public discourse.

(a) the Tweeting Style of Peter Altmaier, Cdu (@Peteraltmaier) During the 2013 Election Campaign

Apart from the top candidate of the Social Democrats Peer Steinbrück (with over 13,800 tweets received, see Table 3.1) no other politician has been mentioned or directly addressed on Twitter as often as Peter Altmaier, the Federal Minister of the Environment (member of the Christian

Democrats, almost 50,000 Twitter followers at the time of the election). He gets addressed or mentioned by other Twitter users in 4,510 tweets (see Table 3.1). The operator analysis of Altmaier's Twitter usage shows a very distinctive usage of operators that can be interpreted as *personal-interactive* (see Figure 3.3).

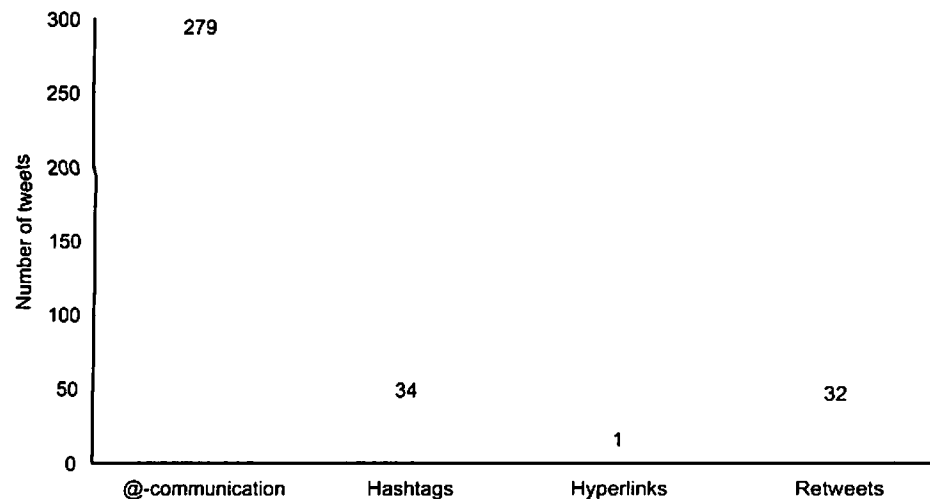


Figure 3.3 Illustration of the operator usage of politician Peter Altmaier during the 2013 election campaign (evaluation period: 1–29 September 2013).

The personal-interactive Twitter style is defined by a more frequent usage of @- and RT-operators compared to the http://-operator usage, especially as the hyperlink has a more informative function in Twitter. In contrast to that, the topical-informative Twitter style is characterised by a higher usage of hyperlinks compared to the usage of @- and RT operators. Altmaier uses more @-operators (in 78 per cent of his tweets) than hyperlinks, which he only uses in one single tweet (this is a link to a post on the online news site *spiegel.de*, which discusses the controversial middle finger photo by Peer Steinbrück). Due to the fact that Altmaier uses an @- or RT-operator in almost every tweet he sent, his way of tweeting can be described as interactive. However, it must be considered that Altmaier is not able to react to all the requests and comments that reach him via Twitter: With 4,510 tweets in twenty-nine days there are 155 tweets on average addressing him per day. Due to the fact that the politician himself is tweeting as @peteraltmaier (he claims that in a tweet from May 23 2013, 6:21 p.m.) it therefore must be assumed that he only responds to those tweets which are most recent or which he holds to be relevant. The analysis of his interaction with other Twitter users sheds light on the group of people (politicians, citizens, journalists) with whom he interacts most frequently. Here we find that Altmaier mainly addresses other politicians or party accounts which he does in over one-third of all tweets. It is striking that tweets addressing political opponents

remain unanswered in many cases. For example, Altmaier mentions the chairman of the Social Democrats Sigmar Gabriel (@sigmargabriel) in eleven tweets and the top candidate of the Greens Jürgen Trittin (@JTrittin) in nine tweets; however, he hardly receives any response from these two politicians in return. During the entire evaluation period, Altmaier receives not a single Tweet from the account @sigmargabriel; @JTrittin answers him twice (see Table 3.2).

Table 3.2 Peter Altmaier's actor specific usage of the @-operator

@-communication to	Number	Tweets	% Tweets
Politicians & parties	144	112	35,4%
Journalists & media	27	25	7,9%
Citizens, bloggers & activists	185	179	56,6%

Another example that gives more detailed information on Altmaier's tweeting style is a dialogue between the politician and a well-known German journalist and publisher of the 'Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung FAZ' Frank Schirmmacher (@fr_schirmmacher, more than 35,000 followers). The conversation (cf. Table 3.3 and Figure 3.4) took place in the week after the National Election (on September 27, 2013). At this point in time, it was clear that the only possible coalition partners for the Christian Democrats (lead by Angela Merkel) could be either the Social Democrats or the Green

Table 3.3 Twitter dialogue between the politician Peter Altmaier (CDU) and the journalist Frank Schirmmacher²

Schirmmacher: @peteraltmaier tweets to @JTrittin in order to make @sigmargabriel read it. Twitter as some kind of Sothebys for political auctions

Altmaier: @fr_schirmmacher @JTrittin @sigmargabriel Sothebys is time-honored and cares for the balance of demand and supply

Schirmmacher: @peteraltmaier @JTrittin @sigmargabriel Right. But it is also a space for raising prices.

Altmaier: @fr_schirmmacher @JTrittin @sigmargabriel I see, this is something completely new. We need to have the courage to look at the intersections

Schirmmacher: @peteraltmaier @JTrittin @sigmargabriel I am only asking if you are auctioneer and bidder in one person. No reason to be upset.

Altmaier: @fr_schirmmacher @JTrittin @sigmargabriel I am super cheerful. Shall we enter new ground? Or shall we consolidate?

Schirmmacher: @peteraltmaier @JTrittin @sigmargabriel You say! We are not all bidding, we are only writing the auction report.

Altmaier: @fr_schirmmacher @JTrittin @sigmargabriel OK. I will say it: When time has come. I have a dream, but sometimes I wake up.

Chrissie: The old politicians @fr_schirmmacher @peteraltmaier @JTrittin @sigmargabriel copy the Pirate's way of communicating ☺

Schirmmacher: @peteraltmaier @JTrittin @sigmargabriel Careful with the meta data. Someone could find out the price you would go along with.

frankenschirmmacher @fr_schirmmacher 27 Sep
 Der @peteraltmaier twittert an @jtrittin damit es der @sigmargabriel
 liest. Twitter als eine Art Sothebys für politische Auktionen.
 Collapse Reply 13 Retweet Favorite Micro

44 RETWEETS 44 FAVORITES

5:26 PM · 27 Sep 13 · Details

Reply to @fr_schirmmacher @peteraltmaier @jtrittin @sigmargabriel

Peter Altmaier @peteraltmaier 27 Sep
 @fr_schirmmacher @jtrittin @sigmargabriel Sothebys ist alteinfindig
 und sorgt für den Ausgleich von Angebot und Nachfrage!
 Expand

frankenschirmmacher @fr_schirmmacher 27 Sep
 @peteraltmaier @jtrittin @sigmargabriel Stimmt. Ist aber auch ein
 Preistreibportal.
 Expand

Peter Altmaier @peteraltmaier 27 Sep
 @fr_schirmmacher @jtrittin @sigmargabriel Ach so, ja. Ist ja ganz was
 Neues! Wir müssen den Mut haben, die Schrittmengen zu
 betrachten.

frankenschirmmacher @fr_schirmmacher 27 Sep
 @peteraltmaier @jtrittin @sigmargabriel Ich frage doch nur, ob Sie
 Auktionator und Bieter in einer Person sind. Kein Grund, sich
 aufzuregen.
 Expand

Peter Altmaier @peteraltmaier 27 Sep
 @fr_schirmmacher @jtrittin @sigmargabriel Ich bin super aufgedreht
 Wollen wir Neuland betreten? Oder sollen wir konsolidieren?

frankenschirmmacher @fr_schirmmacher 27 Sep
 @peteraltmaier @jtrittin @sigmargabriel Sagen Sie es! Wir
 alle blättern nicht mit sondern schreiben nur den
 Auktionsbericht.
 Details

Peter Altmaier @peteraltmaier 27 Sep
 @fr_schirmmacher @jtrittin @sigmargabriel Ok. Ich werde es
 sagen. Wenn es soweit ist. Ich habe einen Traum, aber
 manchmal wache ich auf!
 Details

Christisse @SuddenGrey 27 Sep
 Die alten Politiker @fr_schirmmacher @peteraltmaier @jtrittin
 @sigmargabriel schauen sich langsam die Kommunikation
 von @Piraten ab :)
 Details

frankenschirmmacher @fr_schirmmacher 27 Sep
 @peteraltmaier @jtrittin @sigmargabriel Vorsicht bei den
 Metadaten. Sonst erfährt jemand den Preis, bis zu dem sie
 mitgehen würden.

Figure 3.4 Twitter dialogue between the politician Peter Altmaier (CDU) and the journalist Frank Schirmmacher (original text).

Party. The conversation is initiated by Schirmmacher's ambiguous and ironic comment on Altmaier's tweeting style as "a kind of Sotheby's for political auctions". The metaphor of Twitter being an auction house is obviously meant as an allusion to the politician's strategy to communicate on Twitter with fellow politicians: the journalist claims that Altmaier directly addresses certain politicians on Twitter (by using the @-operator) in order to make other (opposing) politicians actually read these messages.

Schirmmacher's remark that Altmaier is trying to put the Social Democrats (personified by their chairman Sigmar Gabriel, @sigmargabriel) under pressure in terms of coalition concessions while simultaneously addressing the member of the Green Party Jürgen Trittin (@jtrittin), is playfully accepted by Altmaier and continued through an argumentative expansion on the metaphor of the "auction house", originally introduced by Schirmmacher. At the end of the dialogue, in which Sigmar Gabriel as well as Jürgen Trittin don't get involved actively but are addressed through @-mentions and @-addresses, Twitter user Christisse (@SuddenGrey, actors group 'citizens') intervenes. However, her comment gets no visible reaction on Twitter by the addressed politicians.

The depicted conversation can serve as an example for other dialogues in the present data set. They point to a certain tendency showing that the politician rather uses Twitter as a tool for discussions with other politicians or "equal actors" (journalists), but rarely interacts with other "ordinary" users. It appears that politicians (as well as journalists) use Twitter as a *public stage* on which they *perform* their arguments. As those conversations emerge spontaneously and are not necessarily held in order to include a wider public, they can be seen as *in-group ad hoc publics*. They resemble an open conversation everyone *might* take part in (as they happen on the public Twitter stage) but take actually place between a defined group of people. Especially during election times, it can be assumed that those in-group ad hoc publics between authorities function as a self-presentation strategy. Politicians know that their Twitter communication is followed and judged by their voters, the media, and fellow politicians.

(b) the Tweeting Style of Renate Künast, the Green Party (@Renatekuenast) During the 2013 Election Campaign

Renate Künast from the Greens was also very active on Twitter in the time around the election in 2013. During the period of data collection she sent a total of 542 tweets. Similar to Peter Altmaier, Künast frequently uses the main Twitter operators, whereby she uses more hyperlinks in her tweets than Altmaier (see Figure 3.5).

By inserting hyperlinks in tweets an external source is integrated, which is then used to refer to other websites, providing background information, news, photos or videos. Compared to Altmaier, Künast uses the retweet function about three times more often. Retweeting can be understood as digital affirmation with which the retweeting user considers the specific

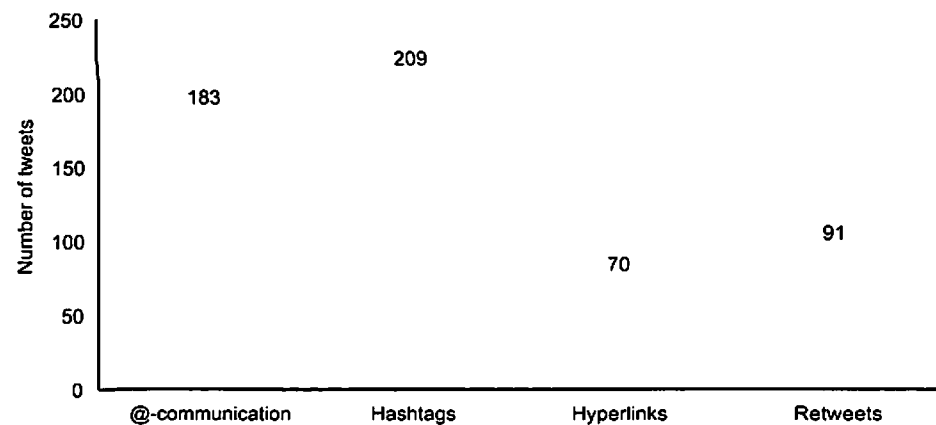


Figure 3.5 Renate Künast's Twitter style.

tweet important and interesting enough to be worth redistributing to their own followers. This function is vital to create and extend visibility in the politics-media ecosystem (Vaccari & Valeriani 2013). In addition, the author of the original tweet gets notified about the retweet. One example indicates that Renate Künast seems to be well aware of this communication process: she retweets a tweet by journalist Frank Schirrmacher, which deals with the possibility of addressing targeted voters selectively by using big data: “RT @fr_schirrmacher: How big data are invalidating the electoral secret: we know who you vote for <http://t.co/di7X6mYqUD> #faz” (“RT @fr_schirrmacher: Wie Big Data das Wahlgeheimnis aushebelt: Wir wissen, wen du wählen wirst <http://t.co/di7X6mYqUD> #faz”). The strategy with which Künast addresses potential constituents on purpose substantiates the assumption that politicians who use Twitter in a professional way are well aware of their potential influence beyond their own followers.

Regarding her Twitter activity during the evaluation period, Renate Künast is particularly active during specific political events, i.e., the TV debate between Angela Merkel and Peer Steinbrück. Künast's participation is characterised by a high usage of topic-related hashtags (she uses more than five times as many hashtags as Peter Altmaier). For example, she comments on Steinbrück's statements in the TV debate by summarizing the most important aspects of his candidacy: “Steinbrück: affordable housing, education for my children. The daily life of the people. Exactly! #tvduell” (“Steinbrück: bezahlbarer Wohnraum, Bildung meiner Kinder. Der Alltag der Menschen. Genau! #tvduell”).

Particularly during times of elections, politicians are subject to critical and polemic tweets (see Chapter 9 in this volume). In 2013, Renate Künast was often personally addressed on Twitter when users expressed their disrespect towards her party. In one tweet, a voter addresses Künast by telling her that he would not vote for the Greens but for the new party AfD (“Alternative for Germany”, Euro-sceptical party): “@RenateKuenast @Die_Gruenen Well, of

course! Anything but Die Grünen! Tomorrow AfD!!!!” (“@RenateKuenast @Die_Gruenen Aber sicher doch! Nur nicht die Grünen! Morgen AfD!!!!”). On the other hand, when the electoral debacle of the Greens became apparent, Twitter users also sent messages of solidarity and regret to Künast as a representative for her party: “@RenateKuenast focus on your areas of expertise! I am disappointed. Lost so much popularity in such a short time” (“@RenateKuenast besinnt euch auf euere kompetenzfelder! Was bin ich enttäuscht. In so kurzer Zeit soviel Zuspruch verlieren”).

The analysis of the Twitter communication of Altmaier and Künast highlights the role of Twitter as a public stage for politicians during election campaigns. Both candidates use Twitter less to publicly address their (prospective) voters but more particularly to engage with colleagues as well as political opponents openly. Twitter allows both for political controversy, which can be used to distinguish oneself, and for digital appeasement, which manifests itself in an extreme form of intra-party support. This “heterarchical” in-group talk among politicians points to Twitter's function as political stage instead of a platform for interaction between politicians and citizens.

3.4 Conclusion

This chapter emphasises two central aspects of Twitter as a digital space for political communication and discourse. On the one hand we find that during election campaigns citizens as well as politicians and journalists actively participate in digital public discourse on Twitter and foster the formation of ad hoc (mini-)publics. Here, they negotiate and try to explain political issues by using hashtags or taking a rather satirical standpoint. In addition, it was shown that Twitter has become a relevant discussion platform for people while watching political events on TV (second screen type of use). Especially during TV debates the politicians' statements are commented and discussed on Twitter within the respective topic-centred mini-publics. The specific media logic of Twitter creates a highly interconnected network of themes and people by supporting the technical distribution of ideas and opinions among its users.

On the other hand, communication happening on Twitter can be regarded as an integral part of the digital public sphere that can serve as a conducive environment for deliberation processes. Although Twitter in this respect is mainly used by politicians for interacting with each other and less as a means for dialogue between citizens and politicians, political discussions are performed publicly, can be observed and potentially contributed to by everyone.

All in all these findings underline the growing relevance of Twitter as a public discursive space, which allows for the creation of deliberative mini-publics. However, digital discursive participation always has to be seen against the background of a broader context, which needs to integrate the

technological and social circumstances. Therefore, for future research the focus should lie upon Twitter as one component within wider online and offline media repertoires.

Notes

1. See <http://jensipresident.tumblr.com> for an illustration. Page accessed on 15/05/2015.
2. Additional remark: neither the mentioned @jTrittin nor @sigmargabriel actively took part in this conversation.

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