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and Political Communication  
in a Digital World

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## Foreword

### ‘Ideologies’ and ‘Utopias’ in the Discourses and Practices of Digital Politics

*Simeon Yates*

As Alex Frame notes at the start of this volume the development and implementation of new media digital technologies is a core element in economic and social change in many spheres of society. This dynamic, dialectic and sometimes simply confusing process often moves on at a pace that is hard for social researchers to keep up with. This has felt ever more the case over the last two decades in which new communications media forms and technologies appear to arrive almost constantly. It is in such circumstances that volumes such as this are important. First, the media ‘revolution’ that is underway needs to be documented – both the changes themselves and perceptions of them. Second, at some future point our use of digital media will be as general and ubiquitous as writing and print are now (or rather were in the late twentieth century). We will need points of reference such as this volume to remind us of the stages, conflicts, possibilities and concerns that made the digital world.

All the contributions to this volume speak to the great promise that lies in the use of the Internet and digital media for new forms of politics and for the regeneration of existing political systems. Indeed, for those of us with long memories, many pages of academic research and many hours of conference discussions in the early 1990s focused on the benefits and potential of the use of the Internet for deliberative politics. This was exemplified by the journalistic enthusiasm over online fora such as the WELL whose activities underpinned Howard Rheingold’s (1993) seminal study “The Virtual Community”. Digital media could seemingly address issues of political disengagement and maybe deadlock in our ‘analogue’ representative democracies. At the same time, long before the web or social media were mainstream, others were documenting the darker sides of digital media. Their use to control, limit and survey debate is examined in Shoshanna Zuboff’s (1988) “In the Age of the Smart Machine”. The potential for digital media to polarize behaviour and opinion, and foster conflict can be found in one of the first ever studies of online interaction - Keisler, Seigel and Macquire’s (1984) “Social Psychological Aspects of Computer-Mediated Communication”. As Frame points out in the introduction, current academic debate is still engaged in an exploration of these two themes – though with more nuanced takes on the arguments and with ever greater amounts of empirical data to hand.

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# 11 The Mediatization of Politics and the Digital Public Sphere

## The Dynamics of Mini-Publics

*Caja Thimm*

### Introduction

In most of today's societies, many social and communicative activities implying the construction of cultural meaning are intrinsically tied to media.

There is widespread agreement that one of the most viable forces behind this development is the Internet. Particularly social media can be regarded as a key issue for the process of mediatization. Marked by characteristics like ubiquity, user-generated content (Bruns 2008), multi-mediality and more recently, portability (Chayko 2008, Bächle and Thimm 2014), the Internet has gained increasing influence on people's lives and daily interactions. But not only are private lives increasingly shaped by mediated exchanges, the public sphere is undergoing changes as well. More and more people are using the Internet as a platform and outlet for their personal opinions, criticisms and decision-making. Most notably, citizens all over the world have been taking their protests to the Internet (see Shirky 2011 for an overview), prominently during the so-called 'Arab Spring' in 2011 (Tufekci and Wilson 2012), but also in other parts of the world, like Germany (Thimm and Bürger 2012) or France (Mercier 2014, Frame and Brachotte 2015).

Some researchers characterize these changes within the public, political, secular, institutional and private spheres and in daily life as a pivotal 'meta-processes' (Krotz 2007, Hepp and Krotz 2014). This focus on the role of media as a driving force of social change is one of the main characteristics of the concept of mediatization (Lundby 2009). Looking at the changes in political participation from the perspective of mediatization as a dynamic process offers an approach to the media as a driving force of these changes, which are currently being experienced around the globe (Couldry and Hepp 2013).

### 11.1 The Mediatization of Politics

When regarding the mediatization of politics it is evident that social relations online play an increasingly important role. People meet on the web, organize activities and exchange information, whether on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or in blogs. Social interaction and group formation

in particular must consequently be revisited in light of social networking sites (SNS), which provide space for such diverse functions as identity-, relationship- and information-management (Baym 2010, Boyd and Ellison 2007). Social media can be conceptualized as a space of “digital sociality” (see contributions in Anastasiadis and Thimm 2011), with individuals often relating to each other along similar interests and online activities. These socio-communicative functionalities have also spawned new forms of mediatized political communication such as “pirate” cultures online (Lindgren and Lundström 2015) or cyber-protest (Donk van de, Loader, Nixon, and Rucht 2005). Lindgren and Lundström (2015) argue, for example, that Twitter and the Internet have a particularly strong potential to create a space for what Beck terms “subpolitics”: politics that are not “governmental, parliamentary, and party politics”, but take place in “all the other fields of society” (Beck 1997, 52). The new vigor of participation can be regarded as one of the major developments in user empowerment, as digital networks and communications were actually developed to meet the desire for interpersonal contact (Rheingold 2000). By going online, civic discourses expand and pluralize the existing systems of political communication, meaning that everyone, not only political elites, can readily express their socio-political concerns. Such civic media activity has also started to shape the news agenda, circumventing the traditional gatekeepers, such as TV or print media. Nowadays, many newspapers take up issues from the digital agenda set in social media environments, use SNS for their own news distribution, or develop their presence on social media platforms. SNS have experienced strong growth thanks, in particular, to the potential for self-expression they offer to Internet users. Linked to the idea of free self-expression and easy sharing, accounts on networks like Facebook or Twitter are associated with a desire for self-affirmation, which Allard and Vandenberghe (2003) call “expressive individualism”. For a better understanding of these new participation motives on the part of the users, it seems necessary to reflect on the changing role of group formation and group coherence as well as on the changing options by social media in relation to traditional mass media. Journalistically produced mass media still have an important role for the public sphere, but as discourse circulates between digital publics in reaction to events reported in the traditional media, and their echoes on the Internet and SNS, the media agenda is increasingly influenced by discourses and topics stemming from the web.

As illustrated, media development and societal changes are closely connected. This interrelatedness is at the core of the “mediatization theory” (Hepp and Krotz 2014, Lundby 2009, Hjarvard 2013). Convincingly, Krotz (2007) argues for mediatization as a “meta-process” of social or cultural change, comparable to globalization and commercialization:

Today, globalization, individualization, mediatization and the growing importance of the economy, which we here call commercialization, can

be seen as the relevant meta-processes that influence democracy and society, culture, politics and other conditions of life over the longer term.

(Krotz 2007, 257)

Media have become so important because of how they are used in communicative behavior within society and how they help construct reality (Krotz 2009). Thus, mediatization focuses on the increasing importance of media for work, play and social relationships (see also Hjarvard 2013), or as Strömbäck and Esser (2014, 8) define: “The essence of mediatization is that it is a long-term process of increasing media importance and direct and indirect media influence in various spheres of society”. These spheres are manifold, as Hjarvard (2008, 2013) points out:

As a concept mediatization denotes the processes through which core elements of a cultural or social activity (e.g., politics, religion, language) assume media form. As a consequence, the activity is to a greater or lesser degree performed through interaction with a medium, and the symbolic content and the structure of the social and cultural activities are influenced by media environments which they gradually become more dependent upon.

(Hjarvard 2008, 3)

The approach is not without its critics. Couldry (2008) for example criticizes mediatization’s focus on “single logic of transformation”, and Strömbäck (2008) points to the difficulties in operationalization and empirical investigation within the framework of mediatization.

When looking at the changes politics are currently undergoing from the perspective of mediatization, it is not only political communication itself, which needs to be analyzed, but political institutions, stakeholders and social environments as well. Particularly the process orientation, which is constitutive for the mediatization approach, helps to reflect and include different influences on these developments. Taking up the perspective of the dynamics of the mediatization process, Strömbäck (2008) and Strömbäck and Esser (2014, 6) see the mediatization of politics as a “long-term process through which the importance of the media and their spill-over effects on political processes, institutions organization and actors have increased”. Based on this general view, Strömbäck (2008) and Strömbäck and Esser (2014) differentiate between four phases, which point to the increasing dependency of the political sphere on media and their respective logic.

In these four phases the authors assume a gradual increase of the role media play in the political process and see the media as indispensable to the political system and its protagonists. This model is presupposing media as a powerful and controlling system, in which the media logics (Altheide and Snow 1979) determine the political logics of political actors and institutions in the end.

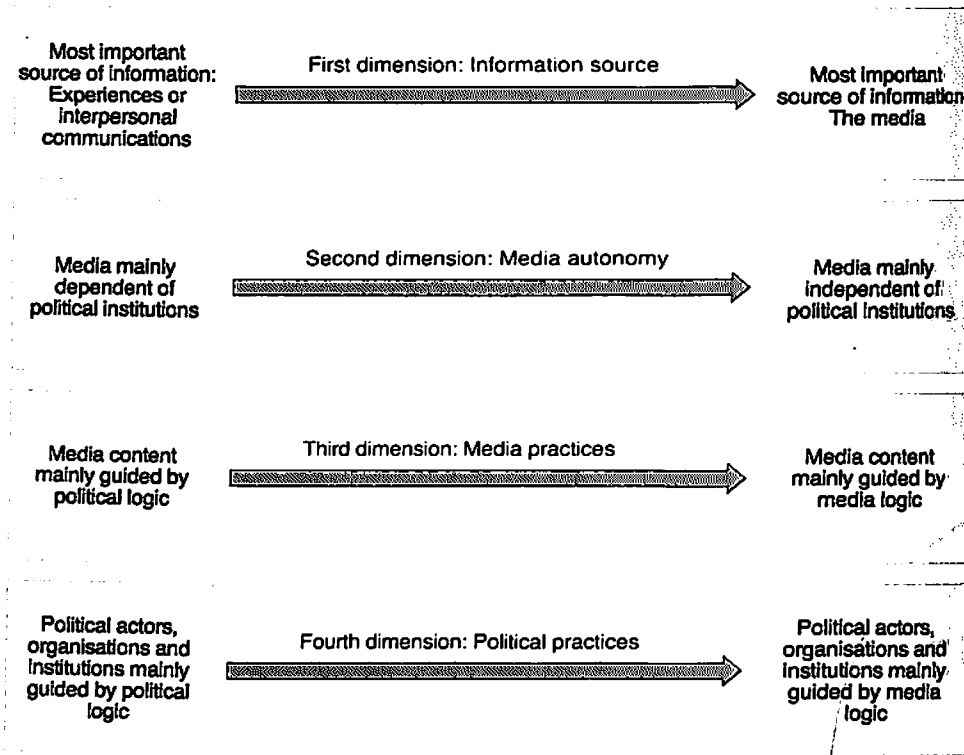


Figure 11.1 Four Phases of mediatization (Strömbäck and Esser 2014, 8)<sup>1</sup>.

### 11.2 The Mediatization of the Public Sphere

Over the years, the concept of the public sphere has been applied and linked to many issues and approaches in media and communication theory (Breese 2011). The main underlying ideas, however, are based on the works of Habermas and his notion of the public sphere (Habermas 1989). At the core of Habermas’ work is the description of the evolution from personal opinion to public opinion and the socio-structural transformation of the latter. With the advent of the Internet as a new driving force in society, the conceptualization of society as a “network society”, which is characterized by “networks operated by information and communication technologies based in microelectronics and digital computer networks” (Castells 2005, 32), lay the ground for an understanding of the public sphere as organized on the basis of media communication networks (Castells 2008). In many works on the role of the Internet in relation to the public sphere, many authors have highlighted the potential of the Internet to advance political communication (for example, Dahlberg 2007, Dahlgren 2009, Papacharissi and De Fatima Oliveira 2012). Less optimistic perspectives point to possible downsides of political communication on the Internet such as the fragmentation or polarization of society, the digital divide (Norris 2001), the limited flow of

information due to algorithmic power in the “filter bubble” (Pariser 2011) and its intellectual “shallowness” in general (Carr 2010). More explicitly, Morozov (2011) sees the risks of surveillance by governments and calls the hopes for net-based democratic changes a “net delusion”.

More recent work, particularly on social media, however, has argued that any over-generalization might not grasp the real activities of the participants and argue for a more situated and contextualized approach (see contributions in Einspänner-Pflock, Dang-Anh, and Thimm 2014). The very general perspectives might not be able to assess the ways people engage and participate in specific settings and for specific purposes, such as situated activities, which users engage in and for which the Internet is made useful from their point of view. Particularly the ease with which publicity and public attention can be generated without the gatekeeping force of the traditional mass media is an important factor for political participation online.

Overall there can be no doubt that the transition of the public sphere in the direction of a digital public sphere marks an important societal change, as digital spaces can be a venue for the renewal of public discourses on all matters. Consequently, more and more media scholars call for a ‘rethinking of the public sphere’ (see contributions in Lunt and Livingstone 2013).

#### *Social Networks and the Public Sphere: “Mini-Publics”*

Media use in the most diverse contexts has become normality for an entire generation of individuals who have inhabited the Internet as a true living space, which is as natural to them as a non-digital environment. Digital networks and communities were born of social and communicative needs for interpersonal contact (Rheingold 2000, Baym 2010), the motives of today’s netizens, however, are no longer one-dimensional. The trend towards a dynamic-participatory medium can be described as a breakthrough in user empowerment. Although the assumption that these networks give rise to a collective intelligence and a new culture of the “wisdom of crowds” is still much debated (Surowiecki 2005), the Internet is indeed changing political participation and most likely, politics and political institutions themselves as well.

Due to new functionalities, the Internet must increasingly be included as a defining dimension of social relations: the socio-communicative functionality of the Internet is the reason for its explosive rise in use. Social interaction and identity formation in particular must be revisited in light of social networks such as Facebook, LinkedIn or Twitter, which provide space for such diverse functions as identity-, relationship- and information-management (Boyd and Ellison 2007, Thimm 2008).

Whereas in the pre-digital age, mass media played a decisive role in formatting and influencing the public sphere, digital discourse networks do not have such widespread impact. Hence it has been argued that agenda-setting processes have to be reconceptualized so as to include social media (Sayre, Bode, Wilcox and Shah 2010). SNS are perceived and experienced



as assertive technology, allowing users to expose their privacy, tastes, personality, and convictions, without censorship. Consequently, postures of denunciation and protest thus find a renewed space for expression. One aspect of the social utility of SNS is related to their possible use as “counter public spheres” (Downey and Fenton 2003), especially for those otherwise devoid of access to the media sphere, because of their low social visibility or their discourses considered extremist. For these Internet users, the word of the authorities (media, politicians, intellectuals and moral authorities) is questioned, challenged or even turned against them. Twitter, for example, is regularly used as a “controversial sphere” (Mercier 2014, and Chapter 9 in this volume), especially at election time. In fact, in a networked society “it can be more challenging to convince others that your way is the right way when online participants have access to online resources (information or other people) that may offer alternative points of view” (Gruzd and Wellman 2014, 1252). By providing echo chambers (Sunstein 2001) for like-minded individuals, SNS may in fact favor the emergence of counter public spheres within the global media landscape.

This goes hand in hand with a more recent observation on the emergence of “mini-publics” as an element of the public sphere. So far, mini-publics have been conceptualized as smaller circles of (better) informed groups, which engage in information exchange processes and discourses (Bohmann 2004, Goodin and Dryzek 2006). These groups engage in a convergent environment, which can be described by “transmedial” or, as Madianou and Miller (2013) called it, “polymedial”. Such mini-publics become increasingly common in the online-environment: They can often be linked to specific political activities or form along certain topics and interests. However, in the digital sphere, they have to be framed differently and must be differentiated from the perspective of the user and the topic.

### *Mapping Mini-Publics—Perspectives and Typology*

Set in the context of deliberation, the term “mini-publics” has been used to describe smaller decision-making groups. These are

[...] designed to be groups small enough to be genuinely deliberative, and representative enough to be genuinely democratic (though rarely will they meet standards of statistical representativeness, and they are never representative in the electoral sense). Such mini-publics include Deliberative Polls, Consensus Conferences, Citizens’ Juries, Planning Cells, and many others.

(Goodin and Dryzek 2006, 220)

Mini-publics in this framework are closely connected to the idea of deliberation, as they are conceptualized as small groups of people who engage in (political) deliberation. These groups, however, are mostly tied to institutions,

set in the political process and have clear agendas. In the increasingly interactive world of social networks, such groups are characterized more and more by self-formation and self-selection. Mini-publics in the wider sense can thus be created for any kind of issue, whether political or personal. Some are purposely created with the aim of establishing public attention, such as celebrities using their Facebook accounts to get closer to their fans. Often these discourses emerge spontaneously, stay on the agenda for a limited time and thus can also be called “ad-hoc publics” (see also Chapter 3 in this volume).

This restricted perspective on mini-publics does not, for example, offer an approach for understanding the outbreak of intense online debates in specific circles, on blogs or Facebook pages. If we see opinion formation and debates as a central quality of political participation and political engagement, we have to regard smaller publics, such as a Facebook discussion thread, as a *constitutive subset* and element of the digital public sphere and not as a second rate public, which has fallen victim to “fragmentation” (Webster and Ksiazek 2012). Secondly, the size of the group should not be limited to a group “small enough to be genuinely deliberative”, as demanded by Goodin and Dryzek (2006, 220). This condition does not reflect the online realities of many net-based groups, which are characterized by silent spectators or “lurkers”, eclectically active “clicktivists”, and highly engaged activists (Christensen 2011, Carpentier 2009). All of these kinds of members are to be found in political publics all over the world.

Mini-publics online are consequently understood as:

A group of online users referring to a shared topic in a publicly visible and publicly accessible online space over a period of time, by means of individual activities such as textual or visual contributions.

The character of such mini-publics is influenced by factors such as user roles, topic involvement and time frames. The following types of mini-publics shall be differentiated:

- 1 *User-initiated mini-publics*: the topic in question can be initiated or instigated by a user, who might take on the role of a moderator (such as in blogs).
- 2 *Event-driven mini-publics*: real world events can cause intensive participation and online activities on the event in question. Often these are natural catastrophes, political events (such as elections), big events (such as sports), or scandals of any sort. These mini-publics can be brief and may die down as the event recedes into the past, or stay “dormant” in a smaller public which gets reactivated with new information on the event. Mostly these mini-publics start as ad hoc mini-publics (see below).
- 3 *Commercially launched mini-publics*: more and more businesses have discovered the power of smaller and intense debates on products or company policies as tools for online marketing and consumer attention.

These commercially launched mini-publics might, however, not always result in the positive consequences the companies wish for. If not done according to net cultures, such campaigns can result in “digital firestorms” or “shitstorms” (Bieber, Härthe, and Thimm 2015).

To identify the role such mini-publics can play for the public sphere in general and for political participation in particular, it is important to include the time factor into the concept. Two aspects will be differentiated:

- *Ad-hoc mini-publics*: these publics are reactions to incidents of all kinds, e.g., from catastrophes, show business, sports events or politics. They are characterized by a short duration and high intensity. Usually, in these mini-publics, longer-lasting communities are not created, but activities can be rekindled if new information appears on the topic.
- *Over-time mini-publics*: these mini-publics exist over longer periods of time and are characterized by variable levels of activity. Often the issues targeted in these publics are unresolved political issues (such as the one presented further down), long-lasting general topics structured around political interests or very general issues, such as hobbies.

Many mini-publics relate to the traditional media by cross-referencing to mainstream media content in various ways, thereby being polymedial by nature. Others never reach a larger public and stay online exclusively. This category should hence also be included when assessing the quality and reach of online mini-publics:

- *Platform-based mini-publics*: these mini-publics exist on one media platform only and are based on the media logics of the digital environment (like YouTube mini-publics).
- *Polymedia mini-publics*: these mini-publics are defined by their inter- and transmediality. They are either started online and are picked up by the traditional media or vice versa. They are characterized by a high intensity and frequent activities on all types of media and are mostly engaging a larger public.

Overall, these mini-publics can be regarded as both initiators of topics as well as reactive publics, where discussion and exchanges form the central core of online dynamics.

During the process of establishing mini-publics, the media logics of the technology in question can have formatting influences. For example, on Twitter the introduction of a hashtag can often be regarded as the beginning of the formation of a mini-public if picked up by others. If the topic gets attention from a wider audience, the phenomenon of the formation of a “hashtag family” can be observed. For example, in the case of the Paris murders of Charlie Hebdo staff members in January 2015, a large variety of hashtags could be observed, such as #CharlieHebdo, #WeAreAllCharlie,

#NousSommesCharlie, #JeSuisCharlie. The more activities mini-publics generate, the more positions can be symbolized by creating new hashtags of the same family, such as in the case of Charlie Hebdo. Here, connected hashtags were, for example: #JeSuisAhmed (in memory of the murdered policeman), or #JeNeSuisPasCharlie (as a counter argument), #ContreLes-Terroristes or references to connected events such as #MarcheRepublicaine.

An important approach to characterize the discursive connectedness of such publics was found in a study on Twitter network structures. Smith, Rainie, Himelboim and Shneiderman (2014) tracked one hashtag related to the U.S. budget deficit crisis (#my2k) in 2014 over two days. They found “large dense groups that have little inter-connection or bridge between them”, corresponding to a “liberal group” and a “conservative group.” Not only do the two groups rarely talk to each other, they also use different hashtags and link to different websites within their tweets. Only a very limited amount of users has links to both groups. Consequently Smith et al. call this type of mini-public a “polarized crowd”. It is one of six archetypical network structures they found to exist on Twitter. This study does not only confirm the deep political divide in the United States, it also demonstrates that people prefer to communicate with like-minded individuals in their personal “filter bubble” (Pariser 2011).

### 11.3 Mini-Publics and Polymediated Media Dynamics: Examples from the Field

#### *Twitter and Mini-Publics*

One of the most relevant social media for the creation and maintenance of mini-publics is Twitter. The brief format and the specific textual functions make Twitter an excellent tool for information distribution and political exchange.

Though the 140-character format is a constraint, it need not be seen as a limitation; while participants often shorten and otherwise modify tweets to fit into 140 characters, this characteristic of Twitter can also be seen as an advantage.

(Boyd, Golder, and Lotan 2010, 10)

Due to the limited space, Twitter constitutes a complex and semiotically loaded communication system. Users can constitute a multi-referential system, in which authors relate to one another via a specific sign system. This interrelatedness is one of the core elements of the formation of intergroup dynamics within the mini-publics. By addressing other users directly or by just mentioning them within a tweet (@-symbol + Username), Twitter users can build contacts and initiate wide-spread discussions with several participants who are either involved actively or just read along. The @-function helps establishing interactional “cross-turn coherence” (Honeycutt and Her-ring 2009, 2) and creates new options to participate in the political online discourse. The #-symbol is used to mark keywords or topics in a Twitter message and helps categorizing tweets semantically. Twitter users can follow



conversations regarding a certain topic and get a better overview of what is being discussed within the certain field of interest (content mapping). This communicative function of hashtagging stands for discourse organization and content contextualization.

Hyperlinks (each string headed by <http://>) help expand the 140-sign limit of a tweet and sequence the content. The communicative function of linking allows users to substantiate their argumentation within a discussion by inserting multi-modal content, such as photos, videos, or links to other websites. The users can link to online articles or blog postings in order to provide background information or give some “proof” of a claim by uploading a photo or video. Some of the visually stimulating hyperlinks like inserted photos are also used as narrative elements.

The fourth main communicative strategy is retweeting (RT). A user can re-send another user’s tweet by either clicking the retweet-button (automatic retweet) or by putting RT at the beginning of the message. As the initiator of the re-tweeted tweet is informed about this activity, she or he can see who values the tweet. This “closeness-potential” is becoming a strategic factor of personalizing election campaigns on social media, not only on Twitter.

Summing up the following four main technological options based on Twitter’s media logic and its underlying algorithms are open to the users:

- 1 addressing (@),
- 2 tagging (#),
- 3 linking (<http://>),
- 4 republishing (RT)

The image demonstrates the four functional *operators* (see Chapter 3 in this volume) in context of a tweet from the mini-public on #S21 (see below).



Figure 11.2 Tweet with four functional operators (mini-public #S21).

These four functional signifiers offer new opportunities for citizens to participate in political discourse via Twitter. The following *communicative functions* can be isolated:

- *Information distribution*: Sharing and distributing information, sometimes on the level of an “eye-witness medium”

- *Organizing*: Activating others (followers) to engage, sometimes in real life activities
- *(Re)Publishing*: Informing about events from other sources
- *Discussing*: Engaging in discussions with supporters or adversaries
- *Personal sharing*: Seeking comfort and support in case of tragedy
- *Group formation and maintenance*: Keeping in touch with members of the mini-public by social interaction

These diverse functions turn Twitter into a “discursive universe” (Thimm, Dang-Anh and Einspänner 2011). To show how in concrete political situations Twitter can serve as platform for mini-publics, two examples shall be given. Firstly, a case of an *ad-hoc and event instigated mini-public* (the explosion of the nuclear reactor in Fukushima) and secondly, the case an *over-time mini-public*, with a smaller audience group discussing a local political conflict. The cases illustrate the different dynamics, which constitute such mini-publics.

#### *Mini-Publics on Twitter: the Cases of “Fukushima” and “S21” in German State Elections*

The basis of analysis are tweets published by politicians, citizens and news media portals, which were collected during state elections in 2011 in the state of Baden-Württemberg, one the larger regions in southern Germany (11 million inhabitants). In this election the Green Party surprisingly won the election, which was even more sensational, as Baden-Württemberg is not only an industrial powerhouse with the car industry dominating the economy, but had also been ruled by a conservative majority for over fifty years. Since the election, and for the first time in its history, the state has had a green minister as its president. The case is, therefore, particularly interesting when trying to assess the impact of mini-publics on the logics of the political system. Two topics will be analyzed to show how differently mini-publics are being constituted, developed and maintained.

Shortly before the election in Baden-Württemberg in May 2011, the nuclear reactor in Fukushima exploded and resulted in millions of ad-hoc mini-publics worldwide. This *event-driven mini-public* was intensively publicized in Germany as well, as Germany has a long tradition of anti-nuclear protest. The second mini-public dealt with a local issue, an expensive construction project in the state capital of Stuttgart. This project, named “Stuttgart 21”, or abbreviated as “S21”, refers to a plan to put the main train station of the city underground, a project which had been contested due to its costs and destructive potential for the inner city for years. The group of citizens engaged in this conflict, undertook intensive activities in online media, but were also involved in fierce street battles with the police, which is rather unusual conduct for the southern German population. This mini-public is characterized by its local nature, a tight within-group organization and

the political backing of the Green Party, which was opposed to the project from the beginning (for details see Thimm and Bürger 2013).

The data for the study of state-focused mini-publics were collected in four state elections in the years 2010 and 2011 in order to differentiate, for comparative purposes, between local mini-publics on local issues with local protagonists on the one hand and state-wide formations on the other. The analysis is based on tweets posted by politicians (personal accounts selected candidates of each party), political parties (party accounts), citizens ('public sphere') and media accounts during in the time frame of three weeks before and one week after the election. The data can be summarized in the following table:

Table 11.1 Overview of collected Twitter data (German State Elections in 2011)

	North Rhine-Westphalia	Baden-Wuerttemberg	Rhineland-Palatinate	Saxony-Anhalt
Election day:	9.5.2010	27.3.2011	27.3.2011	20.3.2011
Enquiry period:	18.4.-16.5.2010	6.3.-3.4.2011	6.3.-3.4.2011	27.2.-27.3.2011
Public Sphere	8,769	21,288	21,055	15,089
Politicians	3,080	981	1,610	1,833
Parties	1,316	1,829	1,682	1,109
Media	5,496	1,997	2,749	1,434
Total	18,661	26,095	27,096	19,465

The results show that Baden-Württemberg had at the time neither a very active digital public (citizens), nor very digitally engaged politicians. This is part due to the fact that Twitter only picked up a larger user group in the more recent election (see Einspänner-Pflock *et al.* in this volume).

The Twitter agenda in Baden-Württemberg will be assessed by *topic frequency count* in order to isolate the most important mini-publics. Regarding topic engagement, intensity and time (frequency over time), the hashtag analysis yielded the following results.

Whereas the high frequency of hashtags like #LTW11 or #LTWBW, which both refer to the German abbreviation for the election in question, is not surprising, the high number of references to "Fukushima", "Atom" and "S21" give a clear indication of political issues discussed at the time of the election. Comparing these hashtags over time, the following dynamics were found.

Comparing the three hashtag frequencies, two interesting dynamics can be observed. Whereas Fukushima was more important than "Atom" right after the accident, this changed toward election day (March 27, 2011). The participants lost interest in the event itself, while the underlying political

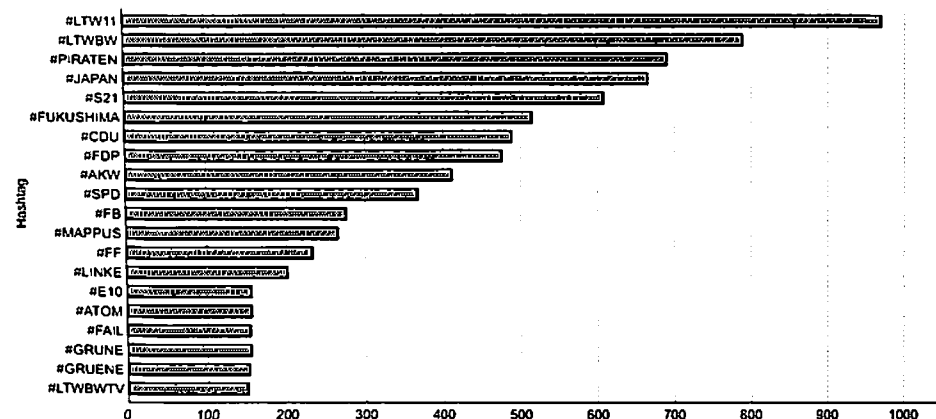


Figure 11.3 Topic intensity by hashtags in Baden-Württemberg's state election 2011.

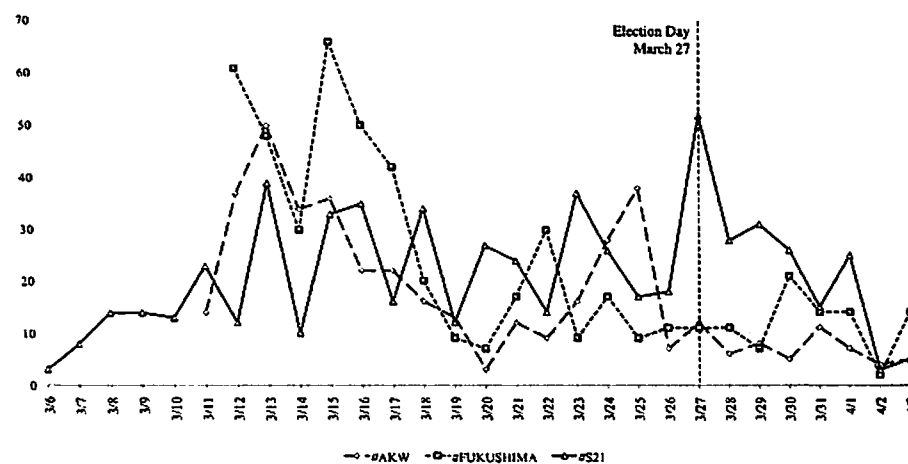


Figure 11.4 The hashtags "AKW", "FUKUSHIMA" and "S21" in comparison.

issue nuclear energy (#Atom) ranked highly. These dynamics demonstrate a typical event-driven ad-hoc mini-public: the more time passes the less participation it receives. The new mini-public, evolving out of the event-driven mini-public "Fukushima", is a much more political one with a topic of general interest for the election itself.

The dynamics of the mini-public on "#S21", the construction project, are quite different. From the level of frequency participation rates stay relatively balanced until election day itself: the high increase of tweets with the hashtag "S21" is a clear indication of an election-related campaign and a get-out-the-vote strategy with the protagonist calling their supporters to the urns.

### 11.4 Conclusion

The approach developed in this paper leads us to argue that the notion of fragmentation does not reflect the role of the net-based publics properly.

Instead, we need to regard the dynamics and value of the activities of interest groups and the ad-hoc formation of publics from a new perspective. Although the two examples described briefly in the chapters above only offer a first glimpse on the dynamics of these mini-publics, they underline the value of such polymediated activities. It is evident, however, that we need to know more about people's motivation, perception or interest for participation in these smaller circles to understand their value for the public sphere in general.

Mediatization of politics, it has been argued, is a process that is strongly determined by the social nature of the Internet. But when looking at mediatization as a meta-process, it needs to be made clear which elements of this process are having which kinds of effects on society as a whole. All signs indicate that due to its high complexity, the Internet is no longer merely a digital reflection of the real world. Online worlds are quickly developing their own rules of engagement that go above and beyond any in the real world. The Internet has become a mediatizer by its own right, enhancing social complexity and even putting our value system to a test. This is true for the public sphere as well, which is currently changing its nature, conditions and manifestations.

## Note

1. Edited by Frank Esser and Jesper Strömbäck, *Mediatization of Politics*, published 2014 by Palgrave Macmillan. Reproduced with permission of Palgrave Macmillan.

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