Twitter in Politics: Lessons Learned during the German Superwahljahr 2009

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Abstract

In this position paper I discuss the impact of microblogging on political communication in Germany. Also, I will present lessons learned on how political actors can use microblogging services in their campaigns. These lessons are based on my work for the German CDU during two major election campaigns in 2009.

Keywords

Position papers, microblogging, Twitter, political communication, campaigning

ACM Classification Keywords

J.m. Computer Applications: Miscellaneous.

General Terms

Position papers, microblogging, Twitter, political communication, campaigning

Introduction

2009 was the year in which microblogging became a relevant phenomenon in the German political sphere. The reason for this was the high frequency of elections in 2009. It proved to be a good year for political actors to experiment with new communication tools. Various elections on the German federal level and the election

of the European parliament led the way to the German general election in September 2009. This high frequency of elections led to the term 'Superwahljahr' (year of the super election).

2009 witnessed the rapid adoption of the microblogging service Twitter by politicians, political parties and political supporters in Germany. The reason for this explosion of political Twitter feeds lies in overenthusiastic reports on the internet-success of the Obama campaign. These reports made Twitter the new must-have-item in each up-and-coming politician's campaigning toolbox. More often than not the desire of politicians to use Twitter, or better, the desire of politicians to be seen using Twitter, led to public ridicule. Even the most skilled political microbloggers were prone to missteps. One well-publicized example is the case of Members of Parliament Ulrich Kelber and Julia Klöckner who twittered the result of the German Bundespräsidentenwahl from the floor of the house minutes before the result was officially pronounced [1]. This and other incidents led to very critical discussions of Twitter and microblogging in general. While this introduced a welcome dose of pragmatism in the debate today the tendency is to declare microblogging as inconsequential and the realm of childish hipsters and self-marketing gurus [5]. This pessimistic view does not correspond with the experiences political parties and politicians made with Twitter. In this position paper I want to discuss the applications of microblogging in politics and present some of the lessons learned during the Superwahljahr 2009.

To do so I base my observations on my own campaign activities for the German party CDU. I worked for the CDU during two mayor campaigns - Hessia 2009 and the campaign to reelect chancellor Angela Merkel in the German general elections 2009. In these campaigns my focus was on online campaigning and the use of social media channels.

Twitter in Politics
During 2009 the microblogging service Twitter has been widely adopted by the political set in Germany. Since then different variations of political twittering emerged. There were Twitter feeds by:

- politicians
- political parties
- official campaign accounts
- private feeds by political supporters

While all these exhibit different characteristics and bring with them different issues for a political campaign, there are a number of lessons learned and open questions that apply to all these political Twitter accounts.

Lessons Learned
During different campaigns in 2009 we found successful ways to use microblogging in political communication. These uses can be collected under three categories. It is important to know that we did not start with the intention of using microblogging to achieve theses tasks. Still, during our microblogging activities they emerged as the most successful usage patterns.

Microblogging as community building
At the beginning of 2009 CDU campaigns faced an online public sphere in which only a minority of CDU supporters voiced their opinions. The online supporters

were few and for the most part not interconnected. The official Twitter feeds of our campaigns (@webcamp09 and @teamdeutschland) served as hubs through which online supporters could find each other and interact. We used the Twitter conventions *@message* and *RT* very consciously to foster this interaction between political supporters. In this way our microblogging feeds became tools for successful community building.

Microblogging as distribution channel for social objects
During the campaigns we found that objects like campaign posters, poster remixes, videos or links to articles were in and of itself of little importance. What mattered was the interaction of our supporters around these objects. This corresponds with the theory of the role of social objects in social media [4]. Our microblogging feeds proved to be ideal channels to point the attention of our supporters to objects on the web that might illicit further interactions among them. This use also led to a strengthening of our community building efforts through microblogging feeds.

Microblogging as communication backchannel to political events
The role of microblogging as a communication backchannel to social events has been often discussed in its positive and negative aspects [2]. During our campaigns, microblogging feeds proved to be useful communication backchannels. Be it for campaign events, which supporters at the event broadcasted through their Twitter feeds, or be it as backchannels to traditional media events (i.e. TV debates, discussion rounds or political documentaries) through which supporters discussed the events or their reactions to it. During the campaigns we made no experiences with disruptive effects of microblogging backchannels.

Open Questions
Although political actors increasingly come to terms with Twitter there remain open questions that have to be addressed if microblogging shall be used constructively in political communication:

Negativity reappears with a vengeance
Negative campaigning was always one of the more ugly aspects of political campaigns. This aspect achieves new prominence through the adoption of social media and microblogging. Experience shows that the most successful content – the content that gets distributed widely over microblogging feeds or creates the most buzz - is negative in nature or a direct attack on the political competitor. If microblogging should grow in importance for political communication this tendency towards negativity has to be consciously addressed.

Expectation management
All participants have to form more realistic and explicit expectations to the uses and desired effects of microblogging. Politicians have to be clear about what they want to achieve with their microblogging activities and how to evaluate those. The public and the media have to form expectations about constructive political microblogging. For political microblogging to emerge as a constructive element in political communication, it is not sufficient to discuss whether 'Angela Merkel pokes back' on Facebook or on similar platforms [6]. Finally one has to accept the realities that online activities of political actors will always be more intensive in times of political campaigns. If after elections online activities decline it is not necessarily a sign of an 'offline autumn' [3] but of consolidation of communication activities and a reevaluation which of these activities are sustainable

during times of lower resources and different political challenges.

Embrace the Fail Whale
An active presence on Twitter by a party or a politician means that mistakes will happen. Be it directly if a political actor mistweets or indirectly when statements of a political supporter get quoted as the actual party line. If society asks of parties and politicians to open up the process of political communication, society and the media have to become more tolerant to the mistakes that will happen along the way.

Caveat
In 2009 German parties tried different approaches to the use of microblogging feeds during campaigns. The lessons presented in this position paper are based on my work for the German party CDU. These lessons therefore might be different from an analysis that would be grounded in experiences collected during work for other parties. Be that as it may, I hope these lessons might serve as a conversation starter to deepen our understanding of the function of microblogging in politics.

Acknowledgements

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