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# New platform, old habits? Candidates' use of Twitter during the 2010 British and Dutch general election campaigns

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## Abstract

Twitter has become one of the most important online spaces for political communication practice and research. Through a hand-coded content analysis, this study compares how British and Dutch Parliamentary candidates used Twitter during the 2010 general elections. We found that Dutch politicians were more likely to use Twitter than UK candidates and on average tweeted over twice as much as their British counterparts. Dutch candidates were also more likely to embrace the interactive potential of Twitter, and it appeared that the public responded to this by engaging in further dialogue. We attribute the more conservative approach of British candidates compared to the Netherlands to historic differences in the appropriation of social media by national elites, and differing levels of discipline imposed from the central party machines.

## Keywords

Comparative research, elections, Internet, Netherlands, politicians, social media, Twitter, United Kingdom

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## Introduction

Twitter has quickly become an important online space for political communication practice because it successfully connects ordinary people to the popular, powerful and influential. It has been argued that its key features make it a potentially fruitful space for developing a more direct relationship between politicians and citizens in a networked environment (e.g. Bruns and Burgess, 2011; Graham et al., 2013a). However, recent empirical studies suggest that Twitter can also foster an echo chamber of political elites (e.g. Bruns and Highfield, 2013; Larsson and Moe, 2013). That said, politicians across Western democracies are increasingly embracing Twitter, particularly during election time, raising important questions of how connections with voters are cultivated and what tweeting practices are prominent.

Although there are a growing number of studies on politicians' use of Twitter, most are based on a network analysis. Only a few examine the actual content of politicians' tweets and even less whether candidates are engaging in different types of interactive behaviour or repertoires of broadcasting their message. Moreover, comparative research is scant. This is unfortunate because cross-national comparisons allow us to understand how and to what extent politicians' tweeting behaviour is affected by conditions rooted in different political and media systems and thus facilitates a 'more nuanced understanding of the novel phenomena at hand' (Moe and Larsson, 2013: 778).

In order to address these shortcomings, we analyse and compare the tweeting behaviour of British and Dutch candidates during the 2010 general election campaigns. Our research, which included a (manual) content analysis of tweets (United Kingdom:  $n=26,282$ ; the Netherlands:  $n=28,045$ ) from all tweeting candidates from national, seat-holding parties (United Kingdom:  $n=416$ ; the Netherlands:  $n=206$ ), focused on four main features of tweets: their type, function and topic, and with whom politicians were interacting. Our comparative design allows us to examine differences across political systems as well as taking into account other factors such as party ideologies and campaign resources across two national cases. It asks if new practices emerge on social media: does Twitter foster broader and more interactive networking, especially between politicians and citizens, and the exchange of political viewpoints thus enhancing political debate during election time?

## Politics and social media

Much has been made of the potential of the Internet and new media technologies for reinvigorating political debate, participation and campaigning, and in transforming representative democracy itself. With more direct channels of communication, it is now far easier for politicians to bypass the heavily mediated connections offered by traditional media and bring issues to the public's attention (Broersma and Graham, 2012), though this brings higher expectations on the communicative capacities of political parties and institutions (Williamson et al., 2010).

For well over a decade, research has been assessing the impact of these changes on politics and what it means for democracy (see, for example, Farrell, 2012). Larsson and Moe (2013) show that research on online political communication was first characterized

by early enthusiasm – often buoyed by media hype – for the democratic capabilities of new technology, which was then met by equal measures of pessimism. Research recently proceeded towards more balanced and empirically driven approaches (Chadwick, 2009). Of the research that has documented the activities of politicians online, a similar journey can be seen.

Politicians have been quick to take up the latest Internet platforms – from websites to blogs and now social media – especially during election campaigns (Thimm et al., 2012). However, mere take-up of these platforms does not mean embracing their apparent interactive or democratic potential. Indeed, empirical studies showed how for many years politicians invariably approached new platforms as one-way content-led electronic brochures rather than listening/conversational tools (cf. Foot and Schneider, 2006; Jackson, 2007; Ward and Lusoli, 2005). Resultantly, they rarely offered ‘any significant reconnection or possible deepening of existing connections citizens have to their representatives or representative institutions’ (Gibson et al., 2008: 127). Even in post-Web 2.0, with the exception of a few pioneers, the approach of most politicians remained conservative towards social media (cf. Gibson et al., 2008; Lilleker and Jackson, 2010; Williamson et al., 2010).

Scholars often point to Barack Obama’s 2008 campaign for Presidency as a turning point in online campaigning (Gibson et al., 2010). It is claimed to have fully embraced social media, resulting in ‘the open and unfettered public involvement allowed in campaign communication’ (Lilleker and Jackson, 2013: 246). Due to the dynamics of the US electoral system and campaign environment, we would argue that this represents a further step in the normalization of digital media in political campaigning rather than a ‘tipping point’ – at least as far as countries outside of the United States are concerned. Nevertheless, many political parties across Western democracies studied Obama’s campaign, often hiring his campaign advisors (see Newman, 2010), and since 2008, we have seen a further appropriation of social media in political campaigns.

## **Tweeting politics**

With an estimated 500 million users by 2013 (Twopcharts, 2013) and because of its speed, networked and public nature of communication, as well as the many ways to link posts to other users (@-mentions), external content (hyperlinks) and topics (hashtags), Twitter has become an interesting tool to reach out to voters. By December 2012, 87% of democratic countries had a leader utilizing Twitter (Digital Daya, 2012), thus demonstrating its apparent relevance and value to the digital politician, and the pressing need for research to keep up with the pace of changing practices.

Twitter has been heralded as a new channel for discussions among citizens and politicians, potentially raising the level of participation in public debate (Bruns and Burgess, 2011; Graham et al., 2013a; Vergeer et al., 2013). Furthermore, the building of communities around ideas lends itself naturally to Twitter, and is a central feature of work on the democratizing potential of the network society. Nevertheless, research into Twitter uses in stable political environments is still in its infancy (Wojcieszak, 2012), with much focus to date given to contexts characterized by political turmoil.

Of the studies that have examined the tweeting habits of politicians in Europe and North America, certain trends have emerged. First, although a reasonably small proportion of politicians are early adopters, the majority of candidates are not on Twitter (Mascheroni and Mattoni, 2012; Vergeer et al., 2013). However, this number grows with every election and varies across countries. It is possible that political and economic exigencies can determine the amount of use, with the level of resources a candidate possesses, state size, and the competitiveness of the electoral race found to be related to Twitter use in the United States (Golbeck et al., 2010). In Europe, party ideology and whether the party is in government or opposition have been found to be contributing factors (Ausserhofer and Maireder, 2013; Vergeer et al., 2013). However, caution must be exercised over generalizing from these findings given the emergent nature of the field, and the single election and country focus of most research.

Second, while microblogging in general has evolved towards becoming 'more conversational and collaborative' (Honeycutt and Herring, 2009: 10), most early assessments found that politicians are primarily using Twitter as a vehicle for self-promotion (Enli and Skogerbø, 2013; Golbeck et al., 2010), information dissemination (Sæbø, 2011; Small, 2011), negative campaigning (Thimm et al., 2012), party mobilization (Dang-Xuan et al., 2013), and 'impression management' (Jackson and Lilleker, 2011). All of this points to a tendency to tweet in a one-way, broadcast mentality, rather than one that listens and interacts; this is despite suggestions from an Australian case study that candidates who do interact with other users appear 'to gain more political benefit from the platform' (Grant et al., 2010: 579). However, in a recent Norwegian election, over half (56%) of all tweets from the sampled politicians included dialogical features such as @-mentions and retweets (Enli and Skogerbø, 2013), suggesting that either practices might be changing, or the political or cultural dynamics in different countries structure tweeting behaviour. Further research is warranted here.

Third, several studies (e.g. Jackson and Lilleker, 2011; Sæbø, 2011) have found that politicians commonly tweet about personal content, giving an insight into their everyday lives, as well as their political positions. While this is often classified as broadcasting, it could be seen as an attempt to bridge the divide between political elites and voters, even if this nearness is a technologically mediated hallucination (see Coleman and Moss, 2008).

Fourth, most national studies found that politicians mainly interacted with other politicians, journalists and activists (Bruns and Highfield, 2013; Burgess and Bruns, 2012; Grant et al., 2010; Larsson and Moe, 2011, 2013; Verweij, 2012). Recent network analysis research suggests, however, that the Twittersphere is not just an echo chamber of political elites, but a conversation that can be joined by outsiders (Ausserhofer and Maireder, 2013). Further research is warranted to explore in what circumstances political debate on Twitter can involve citizens.

To summarize, in this emerging sphere of political communication practice and research, our understanding of common campaigning practices among political candidates is still quite shallow, and lacks a comparative perspective. Our study thus aims to contribute to this body of research by an in-depth analysis of how politicians behave on Twitter during election time. More specifically, we examine who tweets; how much they tweet; if they use the opportunities this platform affords to connect, engage and interact

with others; and who they interact with. Our comparative design also allows us to determine how national context influences the use of Twitter.

## Research focus and methodology

The United Kingdom and the Netherlands differ significantly regarding their political system, and we might expect this to impact politicians' tweeting behaviour. British candidates run for a particular constituency, which they represent in Parliament if elected through a majoritarian, first-past-the-post electoral system. In the Netherlands, MPs are elected via a proportional voting system and a national list of candidates. Therefore, the ties between voters and candidates are looser compared to the proximity between voters and sitting MPs or their opponents in the UK constituency system. Resultantly, one could expect that Dutch politicians are more focused on broadcasting behaviour and interacting with opinion leaders like journalists, whereas British candidates might be more active and engaged with citizens in their constituency. However, as our literature review has already demonstrated, existing findings from social media use by politicians in these countries do not sufficiently support such a hypothesis, with UK politicians often approaching new platforms conservatively.

We therefore developed three sets of research questions. First, we map basic patterns of usage in a comparative perspective. Considering the emerging state of the research field, it is still important to provide insight into who is tweeting and what patterns emerge in tweeting habits between different countries and parties:

*RQ1.* How often do candidates in the 2010 British and Dutch election campaigns tweet?

*RQ2.* How are their tweets distributed during the campaign?

Second, we analyse the levels and types of interaction. While most studies measure for the type of tweet (@-reply, retweet, etc.), very few examine with whom candidates are interacting and the function of tweets, especially in a comparative context. Trends in these tweeting behaviours will reveal further layers of understanding into the ways in which candidates are attempting to make connections with voters:

*RQ3.* What are the most common types of tweets?

*RQ4.* With whom are candidates interacting?

*RQ5.* What are the main functions of candidates' tweets?

Third, we examine the content of tweets. This is usually been done through large-scale computer-assisted hashtag analyses around a particular topic (e.g. Bruns and Burgess, 2011; Larsson and Moe, 2011; Small, 2011). An important limitation of these studies is that they miss out on tweets that are on topic but do not use a (specific) hashtag, which is usually the case when politics or elections are discussed. In order to overcome such limitations and provide a 'comprehensive semantic analysis – including a focus on the key terms, concepts and attitudes expressed in the tweets' (Bruns and Highfield, 2013: 688), hand-coding of each tweet is necessary. This labour-intensive method that few studies in this field have applied is pursued in this article:

*RQ6.* What political topics do candidates mostly tweet about?

### *Cases, population and sample*

Our data come from the 2010 British and Dutch general election campaigns, both of which were very closely fought and produced historic outcomes. The UK campaign included the first ever live TV debates among the party leaders. These events came to dominate the campaign agenda and shaped the party's communication strategies (see Gaber, 2011). The first televised debate saw the Liberal Democrats (LibDems) leader, Nick Clegg, 'win', leading to a spectacular peak in opinion polls for a short period during the campaign (Lawes and Hawkins, 2011). While this did not materialize on polling day, the LibDems formed a coalition government with the Conservatives, as a result of the first hung parliament since 1974.

Opinion polls in the Dutch election pointed towards a landslide. The coalition of the CDA (Christian-democrats), PvdA (social-democrats) and CU (social-Christians) that fell in February 2010 was facing a huge defeat. An array of six televised debates on public, commercial and regional broadcasters turned out to be a neck-and-neck race between the right-wing PVV, VVD (conservative-liberals) and PvdA. In the end, the VVD for the first time in history won the election, resulting in a minority government with the CDA and supported by the PVV.

For each case, we selected all tweeting candidates from the national, seat-holding parties.<sup>1</sup> Due to the different political systems, this consisted of 3 British and 10 Dutch parties. Of the 454 British candidates and 221 Dutch candidates with an account, those who posted one or more tweets during the 2 weeks of the campaigns (United Kingdom:  $n=416$ ; the Netherlands:  $n=206$ ) were included in the analysis. In both cases, this included a diverse set of candidates with a wide spectrum of campaign resources – from those highly resourced and professionally run, to those who used twitter much more personally, without any party support.

The election campaign was selected, as opposed to a non-election period, because it is one of the most intensive periods of communication and interaction between voters and politicians. The official election campaigns began in the United Kingdom on 6 April (6 May was polling day), and in the Netherlands on 1 May (9 June was polling day). In order to make the study more manageable while maintaining the meaningfulness of the data, the sample of tweets was based on a 15-day period: 22 April–6 May (United Kingdom) and 26 May–9 June (the Netherlands). All tweets posted during this period (United Kingdom:  $n=26,282$ ; the Netherlands:  $n=28,045$ ) were included in the analysis. On four separate occasions, the data for each candidate were manually archived via their Twitter feed with the final scrape taking place on the day after the election. The final 2 weeks were selected as these are typically the most active weeks during an election campaign.

### *Coding categories*

A content analysis was employed as the primary instrument for investigation. The unit of analysis was the individual tweet. The context unit of analysis was the thread in which it

was situated. The context played an integral role in the coding process because it was often necessary to have read earlier tweets in order to understand a post. Consequently, coders were trained to take the context into account and code a tweet, when applicable, as a continuation of previous tweets from the Twitter feed or in the context of @-reply exchanges. In order to increase the reliability of the findings, coders were assigned candidates and coded their tweets chronologically.

The detailed coding scheme focused on four features of tweets. First, the type of tweet was identified (e.g. @-reply, retweet). Second, all those tweets coded as @-replies were subsequently coded for with whom they were interacting. Third, all tweets were coded for 1 of 14 functions that we outline in more detail below. Finally, coders categorized the *primary* political topic of each tweet. In order to account for the variety of topics across both cases, a comprehensive list of topic codes was utilized, consisting of 19 categories. In those cases, where a tweet contained multiple functions and/or multiple topics, coders were trained to use a set of rules and procedures for identifying the primary/dominant function and/or topic (e.g. the function comprising of the most characters).

### Reliability

The coding was carried out by a team of six coders. In addition to the two coding trainers (Peter and Lauf, 2002), four additional coders were trained over two training sessions and assigned to code approximately a sixth of the sample each. The intercoder reliability test was based on a set of tweets taken from a random sample of 10% of the tweeting candidates. Consequently, for each candidate, 10 tweets in sequential order were randomly selected. The reliability scores for the average pairwise Cohen's kappa were as follows: type 0.97, interaction with 0.76, function 0.66 and topic 0.67. This ranges between high intercoder reliability (0.80) and a value of 0.60 which is an acceptable level (Viera and Garrett, 2005).

### Findings

The first group of research questions (RQs 1 and 2) examined the frequency and volume of use by candidates. As Table 1 indicates, the adoption of Twitter was much more prevalent among Dutch candidates than their British colleagues: 42% of Dutch candidates posted at least one tweet during the last 2 weeks of the campaign compared to 22% for British candidates. In the Dutch case, there were five parties that showed higher than average levels of adoption. Nearly half or more of the candidates from three of the four largest parties (two of the three parties that formed the government: CDA 57%, PvdA 49%; and one of the opposition parties: VVD 53%), along with two of the small progressive parties (Green Party [GL] 60%, Democrats 66 [D66] 54%), were using Twitter during the campaign. It is striking that candidates from the two prominent (left-wing and right-wing) populist parties showed less than average levels of adoption (Socialist Party [SP] 18%, PVV 19%). In the British case, LibDem candidates had the highest adoption rate at slightly more than a quarter using Twitter while Conservatives were less embracing at 19%.

As Table 2 reveals, not only were there more LibDems using Twitter, they also posted substantially more tweets, representing nearly half of the British case and averaging 78



**Table 1.** Tweeting British and Dutch candidates per party.

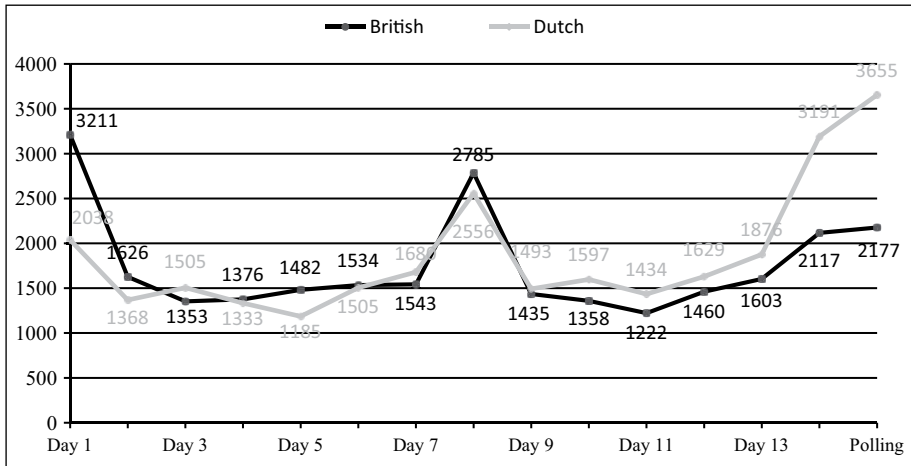
	N tweeting candidates	N candidates	%
Conservatives	118	631	18.7
Labour	136	631	21.6
LibDems	162	631	25.7
Total	416	1893	22.0
VVD	39	73	53.4
PvdA	34	70	48.6
PVV	9	48	18.8
CDA	43	75	57.3
SP	9	50	18.0
D66	27	50	54.0
GL	18	30	60.0
CU	17	50	34.0
PvdD	7	17	41.2
SGP	3	30	10.0
Total	206	493	41.8

LibDems: Liberal Democrat; VVD: conservative-liberals; PvdA: social-democrats; PVV: right-wing populist party; CDA: Christian-democrats; SP: Socialist Party; D66: social-liberals; GL: Green Party; CU: social-Christians; PvdD: Animal Rights Party; SGP: Christian right party.

**Table 2.** Frequency of British and Dutch tweets per candidate by party.

	N	%	Mean	Median	SD
Conservatives	5168	19.7	43.80	22.00	61.767
Labour	8469	32.2	62.27	30.50	87.770
LibDems	12,645	48.1	78.06	36.00	143.105
Total	26,282	100	63.18	30.00	108.129
VVD	8061	28.7	206.69	98.00	226.832
PvdA	3451	12.3	101.50	46.00	127.698
PVV	646	2.3	71.78	34.00	89.228
CDA	4066	14.5	94.56	41.00	106.653
SP	954	3.4	106.00	104.00	51.895
D66	2874	10.2	106.44	79.00	124.298
GL	3615	12.9	200.83	147.50	195.371
CU	2868	10.2	168.71	117.00	155.137
PvdD	1171	4.2	167.29	28.00	286.907
SGP	339	1.2	113.00	67.00	103.015
Total	28,045	100.0	136.14	78.00	164.884

SD: standard deviation; LibDems: Liberal Democrat; VVD: conservative-liberals; PvdA: social-democrats; PVV: right-wing populist party; CDA: Christian-democrats; SP: Socialist Party; D66: social-liberals; GL: Green Party; CU: social-Christians; PvdD: Animal Rights Party; SGP: Christian right party.



**Figure 1.** British and Dutch tweet count over 15 days of the campaign.

tweets per candidate in comparison to 62 and 44 tweets for Labour and the Conservatives. When comparing the two cases, it is clear that Dutch candidates were considerably more active on Twitter; they averaged more than twice as many tweets per candidate than their British counterparts (136 vs 63 tweets). With the exception of the PVV and CDA, the remaining eight parties averaged 100 or more tweets with the VVD, GL, CU and small progressive/activist party (PvdD) averaging a remarkable 167 tweets or more per candidate. However, we should take note of standard deviations given the divergence in posting rates among candidates. In both cases, the distribution of tweets was far from egalitarian, suggesting a long tail. More specifically, 18% of British candidates (posting 100 or more tweets) were responsible for 61% of all tweets, while 39% accounted for 83% in the Dutch case.

Although there were substantial differences in the adoption and frequency of use of Twitter between the cases, a common pattern between the two regarding the distribution of tweets over the final 2 weeks of the campaigns did emerge. As Figure 1 shows, in both cases, there were four peak days of posting activity: 39% of British and 41% of Dutch tweets were posted during these days. In both cases, these spikes in activity correspond with the televised party leader debates (especially in the United Kingdom) and the final 2 days of the campaign (especially in the Netherlands).

In the United Kingdom, 22 and 29 April were the most active days, accounting for 23% of tweets. This activity corresponds with the final two televised Prime Ministerial Debates hosted by Sky and the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). The first day, 22 April, also marked a string of attacks by the Tory press on party leader Nick Clegg (see Deacon and Wring, 2011). A substantial portion of tweets from LibDem and Labour candidates were in response to this coverage. In the Netherlands, the 26 May and 8 June marked two of the three main televised debates hosted by RTL and the public service broadcaster NOS. On 2 June, RTL organized a 'Twitter Debate', which was hosted by renowned journalist Frits Wester. Candidates from most parties participated in this online

**Table 3.** Type of tweet posted by candidates per country (%).

	British (n=26,282)	Dutch (n=28,045)	Chi-square (df)	Phi
Singleton	48.2	39.2*	447 (1)	.091
@-Reply	31.8	47.4*	1368 (1)	-.159
Retweet	18.2	10.9*	570 (1)	.102
Retweet with comments	1.8	2.5*	28 (1)	-.023

df: degrees of freedom.

Chi-square tests for independence.

\* $p < .01$ .

debate waged exclusively via Twitter. In both cases, the spikes in Twitter activity were a result of candidates commenting on (or participating in) these debates. During the final 2 days of the campaign, Twitter activity by both groups increased, particularly among Dutch candidates who then posted almost a quarter of all tweets (24%), although the latter also relates to the last televised debate. In both campaigns, much of this activity consisted of campaign promotion and acknowledging supporters.

The next group of questions (RQs 3–5) examined the level and type of interaction. First, the type of tweet was identified. As Table 3 indicates, there were significant differences between the two cases, though with modest effect sizes. First, Dutch candidates used Twitter to interact (@-replies) with others significantly more often than British candidates did, accounting for 47% of their tweets compared to 32% for the British case. British candidates, on the other hand, primarily used Twitter to broadcast their messages with singletons, retweets and retweets with comments representing 68% of their tweets compared to 53% for Dutch candidates; posting singletons and retweets was moderately more common among British candidates.

The parties within each case differed consistently. In the British case, chi-square tests for independence indicated a significant association between party and type of tweet, albeit again with modest effect sizes ( $\chi^2 = 1145$ ,  $df = 6$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\phi = .209$ ). Labour candidates were the most interactive on Twitter with 47% of their tweets representing @-replies. Conservatives, on the other hand, primarily used Twitter to broadcast their messages with singletons (64%), retweets (17%) and retweets with comments (1%), accounting for 81% of their tweets. Although the LibDems had the lowest percentage of singletons (33%), they were the most prolific ‘retweeters’ (23%); their retweets primarily functioned as campaign promotion. There were also significant party differences in the Dutch case ( $\chi^2 = 1360$ ,  $df = 27$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\phi = .220$ ). Candidates from three of the four largest parties (PvdA 52%; VVD 49%; CDA 46%), the small progressive/activist parties (PvdD 65%; GL 50%) and the social-Christian party (CU 50%) used Twitter predominantly to interact with others through @-replies.

As Table 4 shows, candidates in both cases mostly interacted with members of the public. For Dutch candidates, this accounted for 62% of their interactive tweets, while in the United Kingdom, this was 59%. It is evident that this did not foster an echo chamber for the political elite or like-minded individuals, which was the case when posting retweets; retweets were largely used for campaign promotion and partisan attacks. Candidates also moved beyond members of their own party; 53% of British and 50% of

**Table 4.** With whom candidates were interacting per country (%).

	British (n=8349)	Dutch (n= 13,222)	Chi-square (df)	Phi
Public	59.1	61.8*	15 (1)	-.027
Politician	15.8	22.1*	129 (1)	-.077
Journalist	9.8	12.0*	25 (1)	-.034
Party activist	7.8	1.0	678 (1)	.177
Lobbyist	3.8	1.1*	166 (1)	.088
Expert	1.4	.9*	15 (1)	.027
Celebrity	1.2	.6*	22 (1)	.032
Industry	1.0	.4*	30 (1)	.038
Authority	.1	.1	0.423 (1)	.004

df: degrees of freedom.

Chi-square tests for independence.

\* $p < .01$ .

Dutch candidates' interactive tweets with fellow politicians were replies to politicians from opposing parties. British candidates interacted marginally more often with party activists (8% vs 1%) than in the Dutch case, which probably reflects the Labour and LibDem strategies to focus on using Twitter to mobilize party supporters (Fisher et al., 2011; Newman, 2010).

The final question of this group examined the tweeting behaviour of candidates. As Table 5 shows, the top two behaviours were updates from the campaign trail (United Kingdom 23%; the Netherlands 18%) and campaign promotion (United Kingdom 21%; the Netherlands 19%). The more interactive and engaging behaviours were less prominent among both groups of candidates: acknowledgements (United Kingdom 10%; the Netherlands 10%), advice giving/helping (United Kingdom 2.1%; the Netherlands 1.4%), and requesting public input (United Kingdom 1%; the Netherlands 0.4%). However, there were some differences between the two cases with regard to engaging in public debate. Dutch candidates used Twitter to voice their political (or party) positions more often than British candidates did (United Kingdom 7.3%; the Netherlands 15.2%). In the Dutch case, this typically came in the form of a Q&A exchange; journalists or voters used Twitter to pose questions on candidates' (or their party's) political positions. On many occasions, this ignited public debate, which accounted for 8% of Dutch tweets. For British candidates, on the other hand, this consisted mostly of one-off partisan attacks and one-way campaign sound bites. Dutch candidates too were more personal; tweeting about one's personal life accounted for 9% of Dutch candidates' tweets, while it represented 4% in the British case; though in both cases, it counted for fewer tweets than might be expected. Finally, though the behaviour was infrequent overall, British candidates used Twitter considerably more often to mobilize and organize their base; campaign action appeared in 3% of British tweets compared to 0.3% in the Dutch case.

The final research question (RQ6) examined the topic of tweets. As Table 6 reveals, campaigning activities (e.g. events, strategies, promotion, polling) and party affairs (e.g. coalition partners, leadership, personalities) were the dominant topics among candidates, accounting for 80% and 69% of British and Dutch tweets. Indeed, with the exception of

**Table 5.** British and Dutch tweeting behaviour (%).

	British (n = 26,282)	Dutch (n = 28,045)	Chi-square (df)	Phi
Campaign trail (update)	23.1	18.1*	210 (1)	.062
Critiquing/debating	22.9	19.7*	82 (1)	.039
Campaign promotion	20.9	19.2*	23 (1)	.021
Acknowledgements	9.7	10.2	3.2 (1)	-.008
Own position	5.6	11.5*	594 (1)	-.105
Personal	4.1	8.5*	439 (1)	-.090
Political report	3.6	3.2*	7.5 (1)	.012
Campaign action	3.2	0.3*	676 (1)	.112
Party position	1.7	3.7*	211 (1)	-.062
Advice giving/helping	2.1	1.4*	38 (1)	.027
Requesting public input	0.9	0.4*	55 (1)	.032
Other report	0.5	0.7*	9.9 (1)	-.014
Call to vote	0.4	0.3*	9.7 (1)	.013
Other	1.2	2.8*	171 (1)	-.056

df: degrees of freedom.

Chi-square tests for independence.

\* $p < .01$ .

**Table 6.** Topic of candidates' tweets per country (%).

	British (n = 24,294)	Dutch (n = 23,993)	Chi-square (df)	Phi
Campaign/party affairs	80.0	69.1*	759 (1)	.125
Business/economy	4.3	8.0*	275 (1)	-.076
Government	2.3	3.9*	110 (1)	-.048
Health/social welfare	2.2	2.9*	26 (1)	-.023
Civil/human rights	1.8	1.1*	41 (1)	.029
Immigration	1.5	.9*	31 (1)	.026
Infrastructure	1.4	2.0	27 (1)	-.024
Education	1.4	2.0*	30 (1)	-.025
Environment	1.0	2.5*	144 (1)	-.055
Crime/judicial proceedings	0.6	1.4*	85 (1)	-.042
Animal rights	0.3	1.1*	100 (1)	-.046
Other	3.2	5.1*	104 (1)	-.047

df: degrees of freedom.

The topic was not applicable for 1988 British tweets and 4052 Dutch tweets. These are excluded from the count. Of the 19 topic categories with  $<1\%$  for both the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, 8 were collapsed into 'other'. Chi-square tests for independence.

\* $p < .01$ .

the two smallest Dutch parties (PvdD 58%; SGP 38%), this accounted for more than two-thirds of candidates tweets. Of the policy tweets, business and economy (United Kingdom 4%; the Netherlands 8%), government (United Kingdom 2%; the Netherlands 4%) and

health and social welfare (United Kingdom 2%; the Netherlands 3%) were the most frequent topics.

## Discussion

Our analysis of candidates' tweeting behaviour revealed significant differences between the two cases, which reflects the different political and (social) media systems and cultures. Dutch politicians have embraced Twitter far more actively than their British counterparts. They were almost twice as likely to be present on Twitter, and averaged more than double the number of tweets per candidate than British politicians. One possible explanation here may be linked to the history and popularity of social media use in the countries. In the Netherlands, social networking sites have had a longer history than in the United Kingdom. Hyves, a similar platform as Myspace and Facebook, was launched in 2004 and quickly became popular. After PvdA party leader Wouter Bos had joined the site on the eve of the 2006 election, all major Dutch parties, MPs and even the prime minister followed; social media were swiftly incorporated in the communication strategies of Dutch politicians and parties (Spanjar, 2012). Moreover, in 2010, the Netherlands had one of the highest adoption rates with 22% of Internet users on Twitter compared to 13% in the United Kingdom (comScore, 2011). The experience that comes with such a history along with the incentive to use social media may explain the higher adoption rate and frequency of posting by Dutch candidates.

The differences and similarities between parties, however, were less clear, especially in the Dutch case (see also Vergeer and Hermans, 2013). As discussed above, earlier research has suggested that party ideology, whether a party is in government or opposition, and party size are contributing factors to Twitter use. For the most part, our research does not support these claims. We found no clear pattern as to whether the adoption rate or posting frequency increased or decreased in relation to these factors with one exception. In the British case, it was the LibDem candidates who were more likely to (actively) use Twitter, which is in line with previous research that suggests progressive parties tend to be more active on social media (Vergeer et al., 2011).

However, the level of centralized control of parties does seem to impact social media use. The populist left- and right-wing parties (SP, PVV) in the Netherlands and the British Conservatives actively restricted and controlled the communication of individual candidates to avoid blunders and scandals. For example, the Conservatives took measures to monitor the local Facebook and Twitter activities of their candidates, even to the point of pre-moderating comments (Fisher et al., 2011). In the Dutch case, PVV leader Geert Wilders used Twitter in a very strategic way almost monopolizing the communication of his party (see Broersma and Graham, 2012). Indeed, the parties online campaign strategy revolved almost exclusively around Wilders, drawing regularly on his quotes, performances and interviews (Groshek and Engelbert, 2013: 197). In contrast, parties like the GL in the Netherlands and Labour and the LibDems in the United Kingdom, which actively encouraged social media use by individual candidates as part of their campaign strategies (offering advice and training), were (among the) most active on Twitter (Fisher et al., 2011; Newman, 2010).

Another notable finding was that in both cases, we found a reciprocal relationship between the political Twittersphere, on one hand, and traditional news media coverage and events on the other, which is in line with past campaign studies (Burgess and Bruns, 2012; Larsson and Moe, 2011, 2013; Small, 2011). The TV debates dominated candidates' tweeting behaviour. Over a third of their tweets in both cases were in direct response to the debates, which seemed to foster echo chambers of 'cheering and jeering' (especially among British candidates) and provides one explanation for the intense focus on campaign and party affairs.

Our findings also revealed that the number of followers did not seem to impede interactive behaviour or foster a unidirectional form of communication. For 13 of the 18 Dutch candidates with an above average number of followers, @-replies accounted for  $\geq 56\%$  of their tweets. Moreover, this included four of the five most prolific tweeting candidates, posting 655 or more tweets during the final 2 weeks of the campaign (including two party leaders: Femke Halsema, GL; Marianne Thieme, PvdD). This counters the argument that a personal, dialogic communication style is unfeasible for politicians with thousands of followers (Golbeck et al., 2010). It seems once candidates adopt the interactive features of Twitter and develop their communicative practices as such, the number of followers plays little role in deterring such behaviour. Indeed, research has suggested that the number of followers increases as politicians embrace such behaviour (Ausserhofer and Maireder, 2013; Grant et al., 2010).

As discussed above, much of the network analysis research has shown that politicians, journalists and other political elites tend to dominate the political Twittersphere with regard to, for example, the number of followers, @replies received and postings retweeted. Unlike a network analysis, which focuses on the dominate nodes, our analysis of candidates' tweeting behaviour revealed a different story; when candidates did interact, it was overwhelmingly with members of the public, not the political elite. This is an important finding given the potential afforded to Twitter in overcoming some historical barriers to connecting citizens to their representatives (Graham et al., 2013a). Experimental research has shown that reactions to voters' comments lead to a more positive evaluation of the respective politician (Lee and Shin, 2012; Utz, 2009) and possibly even increased civic engagement. The findings above, especially for the Dutch case, hint at the development of Twitter as a shared and trusted space where interaction between representatives and citizens can unfold and develop. Still, beyond the emerging body of work on protest and social movements, further research is warranted which taps into citizens' use of Twitter with respect to their interactions with MPs and political candidates (e.g. Bekafigo and McBride, 2013).

When it comes to the function of tweets, candidates relied heavily on persuasive, impression management and promotional types of communication (traditional campaign strategies) as opposed to more engaging forms of communication such as mobilizing, supporting and consulting. In both cases, unidirectional forms of communication such as updates from the campaign trail, campaign promotion and critiquing accounted for about half of the tweets. In the British case, one-off partisan attacks were the order of the day. Dutch candidates, on the other hand, used Twitter more as a platform for public debate, presenting their position on a particular political policy or social issue, accounting for nearly a quarter of their tweets. This reflects differences in the political culture which is

in the United Kingdom rooted in contestation that results from a majority system, while the Netherlands have a ‘political culture of non-adversariality that comes with consensus democracy’ (Brants and Van Praag, 2006: 39). We would also argue that differences in media environments might be driving politicians’ tweeting habits here. While both countries have largely commercially oriented media, the United Kingdom press operate in a hyper-competitive environment where political conflict and scandal are particularly newsworthy. When it comes to their dealings with politicians on Twitter, UK journalists are much more likely to use Tweets as the source of stories compared to the Netherlands, led by an agenda of blunders and mishaps (Broersma and Graham, 2012). In an environment where one misstep is a potential negative headline, we can see why many UK politicians have adopted a conservative approach to Twitter.

The country differences are also slightly recognizable in the topic of candidate tweets (the Dutch had more policy tweets), which has rarely been studied in depth before. While the 140 character limit imposes restrictions on the ability to discuss policy positions in depth, the limited amount of policy talk we found on Twitter is still striking. Politicians have often been at the forefront of criticism of political news for its obsession with party affairs over policy (Jackson, 2013), but our data suggest that far from being innocent bystanders, politicians are following a remarkably similar topical agenda in their tweets. Whether this topical focus extends beyond elections is now a pressing question for future research.

## Conclusion

It is important to acknowledge that Twitter is still in its relative infancy and the 2010 general elections represented for many candidates the first time they used the platform. Still, Twitter finds itself as part of the on-going debates about the potential of the Internet to improve (if not transform) the quality of democracy, and it is here where we return. Twitter is clearly being embraced by Dutch politicians, with a high number of active candidates, and an apparent culture of interactivity (at least on some levels) that is not shared to the same extent in the United Kingdom. We might conclude that because of the earlier take-up of social networking sites (such as Hyves) in the Netherlands that it represents a more ‘advanced’ case, and that over time, the United Kingdom and other countries will catch up. However, our research highlights the importance of factors such as political systems, which will always shape the appropriation of social platforms. Therefore, given the dynamics of the party-political and media system and the campaigning strategies it favours, it is no inevitability that UK politicians will adopt similar tweeting practices as the Dutch.

What our study perhaps shows then is the early stages of emerging models of election tweeting practices, which we would encourage future research to further develop. First, there is the ‘old habits’ model, seen in both cases but more prevalent in the United Kingdom. Here, candidates’ use of Twitter was closely aligned with the communication strategies of the party. In the main, Twitter was used as a form of personalized news service for followers aimed at cultivating impression management and influencing the news agenda. There was little attempt to consult with or listen to the public, and broadcasting behaviours prevailed. As Verweij (2012) has argued, when the act of following a politician is akin to a form of subscription to a news medium, then perhaps the



broadcasting habits of politicians are not out of line with the culture of the platform. However, such an approach ignores the inherent social nature of Web 2.0 technologies, that is, their networking and interactive capacities that Internet users have become accustomed to. As Coleman and Blumler (2009) argue, social media offer ‘citizens the prospect of representative closeness, mutuality, coherence and empathy’, which leads us to an alternative model that was also evident in our data-set; one which does embrace the interactive potential of Twitter and adheres more closely to Habermasian principles of public discourse and reciprocity (p. 80). This ‘innovator’ model was more likely to be found among Dutch candidates and those parties (more likely progressive) who ran more grass-roots campaigns. This offers hope for the democratic potential of the platform. A third (and less prominent) emerging model of tweeting behaviour found in both countries (chiefly in the United Kingdom) was the ‘constituency focused mobilizer’, who used Twitter to engage the public by mobilizing, helping and consulting them (see Graham et al., 2013a, 2013b). Candidates here tapped into the potential Twitter offers for creating a closer and more connected relationship with citizens. The extent to which such behaviour spreads beyond a handful of politicians remains to be seen.

A pressing question for future comparative research, then, is the extent to which other national tweeting practices are evident, and whether the patterns we found here extend beyond election periods. Our data also are not able to say much about the effectiveness of tweeting behaviour on electoral success: a question of both practical and theoretical value which we would expect future research to pursue.

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## Note

1. In the United Kingdom, this excludes Independent Members of Parliament (MPs) (1 seat), Respect (1 seat) and Health Concern (1 seat).

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