Cheapest Is dearest, though far from professional: A qualitative study on the use of social media during the Federal Election 2021 in Germany

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Imprint

Disrupt Adapt: New Ways to Deal with Current Challenges in Media and Communication

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Cheapest Is Dearest, Though Far From Professional

A Qualitative Study on the Use of Social Media During the Federal Election 2021 in Germany

Katharina Cremers, Laura Goyn, Torben Krüper, Christina Lehmann, Adrian Liehr

Abstract

Like in other areas, the importance of social media in the German political communication landscape has rapidly grown in recent years. The purpose of this study is to examine how the communication professionals of the different parties of the German Bundestag describe and characterize the role of social media in their political communication, especially in the last federal election in 2021. This research fills a critical gap by investigating 13 semi-open qualitative interviews with both political and strategic officials of the eight parties represented in the German Bundestag. By doing so, it provides insights into current and future social media practices and their level of professionalization in the German political sphere. Both the sample and focus of this study are, to our knowledge, unique in their nature. The results indicate that, while social media is seen as one of the most important channels to both inform and communicate with potential voters, the professionalization in the field seems to be on a relatively low level. Namely, both strategic and political professionals criticize a lack of human, time, and financial resources. Therefore, the parties lack behind in their practices, particularly considering the newest trends and possibilities of social media like big data, algorithms, or monitoring practices. These results suggest that previous assumptions regarding social media as a cheap and resource-efficient practice are outdated. However, the communicators voice future efforts to catch up on these topics. Further research is needed to investigate how the parties meet these intents.

Introduction

Social media is not an innovation anymore – it has become a necessary communication tool for not only companies, but also for political parties to reach their target audience and to keep up with their competition. To this end, studies show that the importance and use of social media in the German political landscape has rapidly grown in recent years. Meyer et al. (2021), for example, prove this trend with many considerable figures: In the last federal election in Germany, the FDP generated over 160 million views with paid campaigns on social media, while the AfD counts over 500.000 fans on Facebook and the green party uses 25 % of their budget on digital formats.

McNair (2017) defines political communication as "all forms of communication undertaken by politicians and other political actors for the purpose of achieving specific objectives" (p. 4). With the rising importance of social media, the view on the objectives related with these communication tools has shifted. While Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan (2013) have described social media as an "ideal vehicle and information base to gauge public opinion on policies and political positions as well as to build community support for candidates running for public offices" (p. 1279) almost a decade ago, researchers now have a much more differentiated focus. Aside from informing the public, they for example also direct their attention on the possibility of social media to mobilize and engage with citizens (Fitzpatrick & Jöst, 2021, p. 419).

Nevertheless, many researchers still share the stance that social media is a cheap, yet efficient way to communicate with masses (Leung & Yildirim, 2020, p. 1). With rising practices and professionalization in the field of social media communication (for example microtargeting or segmentation in advertising (Elías Zambrano et al., 2019, p. 1052)), however, the question arises whether this argument still stands.

Previous studies in this field mainly focus on quantitative content analyses of either visual campaign elements (e.g., Haßler et al., 2021) or with the aim to draw a comparison between different campaign formats (e.g., Steffan & Venema, 2020). Thus, the topic of political communication is mainly viewed from an outsider's perspective rather than questioning the professionals in this field. In the few studies where interviews are conducted (e.g., Geise & Podschuweit, 2019), the scholars solitarily question the strategic communicators of the parties. Many studies also seem to focus on particular platforms like Facebook (e.g., Farkas & Schwartz, 2018), instead of general challenges and trends of social media. Additionally, the different studies mainly focus on the United States and its politics and politicians. However, lessons learned from U.S.-election campaigns cannot be transferred congruently to

German election campaigns for numerous legal, political, financial, and cultural reasons.

Taking the rapid changes and development of the political communication landscape into consideration, a differentiated view of the state-of-the-art of the usage of social media in the German political sphere is missing in prior research. Based on this research gap, the following paper is dedicated to answer the following research-leading question:

To what extent do the communication officers of the parties represented in the Bundestag (= the German parliament) describe and characterize the role of social media applications within their overall, party-specific communication?

To answer this question, 13 semi-open qualitative interviews with both political and strategic officials of the eight parties represented in the German Bundestag were conducted. Following, a systematic literature review mainly focused on key developments such as mediatization and disintermediation, a comprehensive description and discussion of both methodology and findings provide insights into current and future social media practices of the eight parties represented in the German Bundestag. Finally, limitations are considered, as well as the implications of this study for both future research and the practitioners in the political landscape.

Literature Review

Political Communication

From a historical point of view, the origins of the research field of political communication go back to Aristotle and Plato (Kaid, 2004, p. XIII). Despite this, there is no universally valid definition of the concept of political communication. This has several reasons. On the one hand, the terms "politics" and "communication" are already overall phenomena, which are difficult to delimit and reduce in their complexity (Donges & Jarren, 2017, pp. 1–2; Oswald & Johann, 2018, pp. 1–2; Sarcinelli, 2011, p. 19). Second, as mentioned earlier, a variety of academic disciplines have taken up research on political communication. This leads to a plethora of ways of accessing and scientifically approaching the concept of political communication. The search for an interdisciplinary understanding therefore results in a lack of success (Donges & Jarren, 2017, pp. 1–2; Oswald & Johann, 2018, pp. 1–2; Sarcinelli, 2011, p. 19; Schulz, 2011, pp. 15–16).

Choosing an approach via communication science, the actor perspective thereby forms the "most intuitive" (Zerback et al., 2020, p. 4) type of research approach which is additionally used by McNair, Schulz as well as Jarren and

Donges (Donges & Jarren, 2017, pp. 6–8; McNair, 2017, p. 5; Schulz, 2011, p. 16). With this in mind, both, Schulz as well as Jarren and Donges, highlight McNair's research approach (Donges & Jarren, 2017, p. 7; Schulz, 2011, p. 16).

McNair describes political communication as "purposeful communication about politics" (McNair, 2017, p. 4), while stating that political communication includes any verbal, nonverbal, and paraverbal symbols of, with, or about political actors. Furthermore, within his concept, he differentiates between the political actors, the media, and the recipients. Political actors represent "those individuals who aspire, through organizational and institutional means, to influence the decision-making process" (McNair, 2017, p. 4). In addition to individuals in the political system, this classification also applies to political parties, public organizations, advocacy groups, terrorist organizations, as well as governments. Besides political actors, there are recipients who are defined as the audience intended by media and political actors. However, it also includes all people who address the political actors directly or address the political actors via media (McNair, 2017, pp. 10–11).

The third actor is the media. Connecting the recipient and the political actors, it acts as a transmitter for political communication between these groups while also communicating political communication that originates within the media. McNair (2017) emphasizes that this definition includes traditional media outlets such as the BBC or CNN but also services such as Wikileaks and social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter which are summarized under the term "social media" (p. 5).

Social Media

Emerging in the early 2000s, the term "social media" has been at the core of a debate within the scientific community. The term is associated with concepts like the Web 2.0, the social web, or social software. Especially the reference to Web 2.0, seems to be relevant (Hohlfeld et al., 2021, p. 14; Pleil & Zerfaß, 2014, p. 748; Schmidt, 2018, p. 16; van Looy, 2016, p. 22 & 27) whereas the term describes a paradigm shift of the Internet. The term was decisively coined by the media entrepreneur Tim O'Reilley, who describes the Internet's change from a pure source of information to a platform with added value through network effects for its users. (Hohlfeld et al., 2021, p. 17; Rankl, 2017, p. 51; Schmidt, 2018, p. 16).

Following this understanding of Web 2.0, social media can be seen as a phenomenon inherent to this development (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2012, p. 101). Kaplan and Haenlein thus describe social media as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological

foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). Other authors add characteristics to this definition. Social media is therefore characterized by identity management, relationship management, and information management (Hohlfeld et al., 2021, pp. 18–19).

Starting with the election campaign of Barack Obama, who used social media as an integral part of his campaign strategy, social media was considered for the first time as an aspect of political communication (Haller, 2019, p. 49; Ktoridou et al., 2018, p. 33; Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013, p. 2). Since then, there has been a steady increase in research, especially in the U.S. (Haller, 2019, pp. 49–50; Iosifidis & Wheeler, 2018, pp. 11–12), while in Germany the observation of the phenomenon in the context of political communication has been rather sluggish. This is often attributed to the fact that it would take until the 2017 federal election campaign for social media to be widely used within German politics (Haller, 2019, p. 49).

With the constant emergence of new research, the examination of social media in political communication is also becoming more nuanced (Hegelich, 2018, p. 7; Oparaugo, 2021, p. 17). Social media is now primarily seen as a means to inform, engage, mobilize, and interact with people. (Fitzpatrick & Jöst, 2021, p. 419). Emerging research perspectives also address social media monitoring as a tool for analyzing or predicting sentiment for political purposes (Elías Zambrano et al., 2019, p. 1052–1053), as well as the position of social media as a lower-cost, lower-resource alternative to other mass media (Leung & Yildirim, 2020, pp. 1–3). Mediatization is also playing an increasingly important role in various projects to combine political communication and social media. This is also reflected in German projects, which apart from this continue to focus more on fundamental aspects of social media in political communication (Geise & Podschuweit, 2019, p. 1698; Magin et al., 2017, pp. 183–184; McNair, 2017, p. 5).

Mediatization

In general, the term mediatization describes a concept whose focus is on the social change caused by the media and their use (Couldry, 2014; Lundby, 2014). A unified, generally accepted theory or definition does not exist, since mediatization is rather a fundamental approach within communication and media research. Although mediatization research deals with media effects, it does not belong to the field of media effects research but forms a standalone approach. In contrast to media effects research, structures instead of individuals are at the center of research. In addition to direct effects, indirect effects are taken into account. Also, causal media effect explanations are

supplemented by functional explanations. The mediatization research assumes that actors act intentionally – with the aim to induce media effects or to avoid them (Kepplinger, 2008).

Within research, Couldry and Hepp (2013) distinguish between two main perspectives: the institutional perspective that classifies media as independent social institution with its own system of rules ("logic"), as well as the social-constructivist perspective, which in turn describes the role of the different media as part of a communicative construction of social and cultural reality. To describe the transformation in the political sphere, most studies refer to the institutionalist perspective (Couldry, 2014, p. 37; Haßler et al., 2014; Strömbäck, 2008). It is assumed that media and politics are two differentiated institutional systems with different goals, actors, needs, interests, rules, and procedures.

Moffitt and Tormey (2014) define the consequences of mediatization on politics as a simplification of political discourse, the emphasis on opposites ("Us against them") and catchphrase-like solutions (p. 387). However, mediatization is just one of the numerous (meta-)processes which has taken place at the same time as various social developments, which is why the exact influence of individual processes is difficult to assess (Bracciale & Martella, 2017; Doroshenko, 2018; Groshek & Koc-Michalska, 2017; Moffitt & Tormey, 2014).

The undoubted advantage of the internet and social media, especially for populist parties and actors, lies in their low threshold – everyone can create an account on any platform of your choice. The gatekeeping function of established traditional media institutions is no longer applicable, as is the obligation to stick to the established production cycles (Doroshenko, 2018; Engesser et al., 2017). A direct contact with the audience can be established – through disintermediation.

Disintermediation

Disintermediation is the invention of a new medium or the acquisition of an existing one with the aim of replacing a middleman or to omit it entirely (Katz, 1988). The basic model of the theory of disintermediation describes the relationship between three actors A, B and C: A turns to B through which it aims to get in touch with C. Disintermediation eliminates contact with B and A addresses C directly. For example, politician A once had to use the traditional mass media B to get its messages to potential voter C. With the assistance of social media, politician A can now deliver its message directly to the potential voter C without attending a press conference or organize a television appearance first.

The 2008 U.S. presidential election campaign is often referred to as the beginning of a new era of political campaigning because, in addition to the traditional election campaign methods like e-mail newsletters, social media such as Facebook, Twitter, MySpace and YouTube were used (Metzgar & Maruggi, 2009; Spaeth, 2009). The 2016 U.S. presidential election campaign marked another turning point in the strategic use of political communication via social media. The 45th president of the United States and Republican Party nominee Donald Trump was already very actively using his Twitter account @realdonaldtrump before his election to deliver his messages and continued to do so after his election – until his suspension from the platform on January 7, 2021 (BBC, 2021). The American journalist Neal Gabler compared Trump in his media use to some of his most famous predecessors: What Franklin D. Roosevelt was for radio and John F. Kennedy was for TV, this was Donald Trump for Twitter and other social media (Gabler, 2016). Groshek and Koc-Michalska (2017) confirm that social media have made a not inconsiderable contribution, but still, classic election campaigns and television had a large part in his election victory (p. 1402).

However, the lessons of the U.S. election campaigns cannot be transferred congruently to German election campaigns for numerous legal, political, financial, and cultural reasons (Geise & Podschuweit, 2019, p. 158). Especially the strict data protection laws in Germany and Europe are restricting the possibilities of personally addressing voters, whereby the question remains whether micro-targeting would be used by the parties even without these strict guidelines (Magin et al., 2017, p. 1714). In 2013, all parties involved in the federal elections in Germany and the national elections in Austria stated that Facebook is their most important online campaign tool – yet they did not take advantage of the mobilization and interaction potential but relied almost exclusively on the information function of the platform. The reasons given were a lack of resources as well as strategic reasons (Magin et al., 2017, p. 1714).

State of Research and Derivation of the Research Question

Basically, it can be concluded that parties use social media extensively as an opportunity to convey information and encourage political participation, for instance during the 2021 federal election campaign. But the respective structuring of these tasks shows major differences. This also applies to handling challenges such as fake news or social bots (Fitzpatrick & Jöst, 2021, pp. 419–423).

Which strategic role the German parties attribute to social media has hardly been studied in the recent past. Numerous studies look from the outside at

the social media communication of the parties and deal with visual design elements (Haßler et al., 2021; Steffan, 2020; Steffan & Venema, 2020) and textual analysis (Steffan & Venema, 2020; Stier et al., 2018). Exceptions are Geise und Podschuweit (2019) as well as Magin et al. (2017), who conducted qualitative interviews with the election campaign strategists of the Bundestag elections in 2017 and 2013. In both election campaigns, the focus was mainly on informational strategies and unidirectional address.

Following on from these studies, the present work is intended to examine whether and to what extent the social media communication strategy of the German parties has changed since the 2017 federal election. Thus, the following overarching research question is formulated:

To what extent do the communication officers of the parties represented in the German Bundestag describe and characterize the role of social media applications within their overall, party-specific communication?

Based on the research question, three sub-questions were formulated to show the development of the parties' social media use over time. The following chapter will explain the methodology in detail.

Methodology

In this research project, the method of partially standardized guided interviews was used. The data obtained was then evaluated and analyzed with a qualitative content analysis.

Content of the Questionnaires

The aim of the semi-structured guided interviews was to adequately answer the research questions. Two different questionnaires were used for the interviews, depending on the position and function of the interviewees. The questionnaire for the political office holders contains ten questions, while the one for the strategic office holders contains 13 questions. The difference in the number of questions is due to the fact that the "non-politicians" were asked three targeted strategy questions on the use of social media in the respective party. Politicians would hardly have been able to answer these specific questions due to their lack of involvement in strategic social media planning. The remaining ten questions are identical for politicians and strategists and allow a comparison of the views of both groups.

In addition to an overarching research question, there are three sub-questions (RQ1–3), each with a different focus. Based on this overarching interest,

three sub-questions were formulated. The first sub-question (RQ1) deals with the significance of social media over time:

RQ1: How is the integration of social media and its development among the parties' communication described and evaluated within the last five to ten years?

In this section, the participants were first asked to come up with their own definition of the term "social media". They then turned their attention to the 2013 and 2017 federal election campaigns and named the key moments they had noticed in the past years on the topic of social media in the political landscape. The second sub-question (RQ2), on the other hand, focuses specifically on social media as an instrument in the election campaign for the Bundestag elections in autumn 2021:

RQ2: How is the integration and use of social media in the BTW21 [German federal election 2021] election campaign described and evaluated by the respective party?

Here it was ascertained which social media formats worked well for the respective parties, whether there were firmly formulated goals and to what extent individual politicians can control their activities in the social media themselves. The final block of topics is an assessment by the interview partners of the future development of political communication via social media:

RQ3: What future trends and developments within the topic area of social media applications are expected in the next few years?

Of particular interest was which challenges will arise in the future through social media and whether election campaigns will shift exclusively to the digital space in a few years' time.

Final Sample

All parties represented in the Bundestag were included in the study. According to the result of the 2021 Bundestag election, this concerns the following eight parties: the SPD, the CDU, the CSU, Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, the FDP, the AfD, Die Linke and the SSW.
Each party was to be interviewed once from a strategic and once from a political perspective. The persons were selected according to their suitability for the topic of the research project. The sampling was therefore a deliberate selection. Of a potential 16 interviews, 13 could be realized in the end. Each

Bundestag party was interviewed at least once. The interview partners have the following job descriptions:

Table 1.
Final sample of interview partners.

Political Representatives	Strategic Representatives
Spokesperson of the Bundestag parliamentary group	Head of Communications Department at the Party Executive Committee
Parliamentary Secretary of the Party	Social Media Manager
State Secretary	Staff member Public Relations online
Federal Executive Director	Head of Campaign & Marketing
Member of the Federal Executive Committee	Head of Department Social Media
Member of the German Bundestag	Senior Manager Social Media
	Head of Public Relations

The interviews did not take place in person but via video conference, which provided a comparable setting. The interview partners did not know the guide beforehand. This reduced the risk of the interviewees being able to anticipate certain answers in advance. Only rough outlines of topics were given upon request.

The interviews were recorded to ensure a detailed transcription in the next step. For this purpose, the interviewees received a privacy statement before the appointments, which they signed and returned to the research group. With this declaration, they enabled the research team to publish their statements anonymously in the project report. In most cases, the interviews lasted about 30 minutes.

After the interviews were completed, they were transcribed. Software was used to speed up and simplify the process. The transcribed interviews were analyzed with the help of the text software MAXQDA. In order to evaluate the statements generated in the interviews in a uniform way and to make them interpretable, a category system had to be designed. The group decided to use the same categories and codes for both guides and not to differentiate between politicians and strategists. This made it easier to compare the statements in the evaluation.

Reflection and Methodological Critique

Even though not all 16 interviews could be realized, the internal target of a clear double-digit number of interviews was achieved. Only one person from

the CSU, FDP, and AfD was missing in the end. The fact that the SPD, the party of the incumbent Federal Chancellor, could be completely won over for the project is of great importance.

During the acquisition of possible interviewees, some hurdles arose. It often happened that inquiries were either initially rejected or not answered at all. In some cases, it was possible to convince the selected persons to participate in the research project through their employees or in telephone conversations. However, this required numerous attempts; in some cases the contact extended over weeks and several channels. Occasionally, the impression emerged that the communication channels in certain parties could be improved. Coordination and responsibility problems in the parties prevented effective communication between the research group and the party in several cases. As soon as there was a final rejection of a potential interview partner or no response to requests for a number of weeks, alternative persons were contacted.

In a guided interview, it is important on the one hand that the interviewees are exposed to comparable questions and situations. By dividing the questionnaires into political and strategic guides, not all 13 persons had the same questions, but the interviewees in similar positions did. On the other hand, the representatives of the parties were also supposed to be similar in their positions and competences. In practice, it became apparent that not all interviewees were on the same hierarchical level. For example, there was an interview with the federal executive director of one party, while "only" a member of the Bundestag could be obtained from another party without further specification. This supposed inequality was offset by the fact that all 13 interviewees had expertise on the topic of social media communication. In the end, this characteristic is to be valued more highly for the research objective than formal job descriptions, especially since the parties also have very different internal structures and not all positions are also found in all parties.

Results

The different interviews permitted deep insights into the social media communication of the parties represented in the Bundestag, especially concerning the previously postulated research questions. Additional findings could be identified, which exceed the research questions, but are nevertheless considered. These additional results mostly refer to the overall benefits and challenges posed by social media for the parties' political communication and assist in answering the overarching research question. In the following, the interview results are presented, compared and placed in context.

Development and Characterization of Social Media

To start off the interviews, all interview partners were asked to give a brief and personal characterization of social media, which served as an indicator for the party's understanding of social media and how they position themselves around the topic. Two directions could be identified: One group viewed social media as the most important communication channel available, some others pleaded for social media as simply another communication tool that should not be placed above other tools. Both opinions are rather equally distributed:

"For me personally, this is the most important communication tool available to me in my political work" (Political).

Vs.

"A modern form of political communication. Not to be underestimated, but also not to be overestimated" (Political).

More in detail, the interviewees stressed the high reach and two-sided communication function provided by social media, including opportunities for direct dialogue, feedback and discussions. This makes social media no longer optional but essential for the parties' overall communication strategies.

However, it has not always been like that. According to our interview partners, the social media landscape has undergone drastic changes within the last few years: New platforms and technologies have emerged and created new ways of digital networking. Just as many other aspects of life, political communication has been influenced by this development, which is why RQ1 aims to investigate, how the incorporation and development of social media in the parties' political communication withing the last five to ten years is described and evaluated.

The interviewees claim that in the past five to ten years, they have become aware of the general increase in social media usage and showed endeavors to adapt to this development. Their statements make it clear that social media has had a much higher relevance during the federal election campaign in 2021 than it had in in 2013, which was almost none. Accordingly, the amount of work and resources allocated towards social media communication has visibly increased, leading to a stronger presence on digital channels. It was also mentioned in many interviews that the COVID-19 crisis was and still is an additional accelerator in this process since many digital formats served as a replacement for cancelled events and analog measures.

"*Well, back then, it really was like that, we more or less didn't care about it. On Facebook, Instagram, we did the same everywhere. We don't do that anymore*" (Strategic).

At this point, the strategists were asked additionally whether they detected changes in strategic goals and professionalization in the past decade. Almost none saw particular developments in their strategic goals, which is also due to the fact that now all interviews define such goals (for more see chapter "Integration of Social Media in the German Federal Election 2021"). They generally agreed on a definite increase in professionalization, for example in the form of membership apps, newsrooms, or social media communication coachings for party members. However, the results show that the amount of professionalization is not necessarily congruent with the size of the party: Even smaller parties state that they have become more professional with their available resources.

Social media usage is not only increasing but also constantly changing: The pace of communication is continuously speeding up and platforms and target audiences are constantly in motion. Most interviewees remember that 10 years ago, Facebook was the most important social media platform for a young audience, but nowadays all interviewees claim to address almost exclusively older audiences there.

One interviewee sums up the both positive and challenging development of the social media landscape in relation to political communication like this: "*I believe that this development can't be reversed anymore and nobody would want to do that*" (Political).

In the following, the positive aspects that these developments are bringing with them for political communication of parties in the Bundestag are further examined, especially in their relation to election campaigning.

Potentials of Social Media

In general, the use that social media has for political communication is considered to be very high. Many interviewees hope to improve the quality and quantity of their reach through social media as even with limited resources, it offers the opportunity to reach target audiences fast and accurately and provides the possibility to adapt to today's fast paced communication environment.

"*I believe that concerning the effects one Euro can have, the Euro is better spent on social media than for example on a newspaper ad, I see newspapers*

and print media retreating. As I see it, social media took them over long ago"
(Political).

The interviewees name several aspects in which social media brings unique
and beneficial advantages. For one, in comparison to non-digital events, so-
cial media communication is fit for mass communication, because huge
groups of people can be addressed independently of their timely and geo-
graphic predisposition. Several parties also pointed out that the platforms
open new perspectives on approaching the target audience. According to
the interviewees, this makes it possible for audiences to gain detailed in-
sights into politics, stay informed if they are interested, and experience the
parties' identities. Concrete content can be transmitted adequately which
makes political communication less dependent on traditional media outlets
such as newspapers or television. This is an advantage that no matter the
reasoning behind it, all parties thought beneficial for their overall communi-
cation strategy.

"*Well, this is a big advantage, because one can simply reach people in a
better way. And I actually find that if you really utilize it and take it serious,
you can establish a good dialogue with people. During the federal election, I
am of course always out and about on the election stands, just as everybody
else. But of course you can't be everywhere at the same time. […] And in this
case I of course find social media to be a great way to establish dialog with
people*" (Political).

As mentioned before, the parties consider the opportunities for dialogic com-
munication to be an important feature of social media which enable them to
directly contact their target audiences and create connections in the sense
of disintermediation. Besides that, the interviewees list further potentials so-
cial media offers them, such as options for benchmarking with other parties,
launching affordable advertisement campaigns and generating personal
data of users. Especially the last aspect opens the gates for a specific po-
tential provided by social media: accurately addressing new or existing tar-
get audiences. The main tools social media provides for this, are its wide
reach and options for personal data collection and evaluation to further de-
fine and reach target audiences.

"*Yes, why? Why do online campaigns exist? We always kind of talk about a
grandpa- and grandchild-election-campaign. It's of course more difficult to
catch older people through social media or the internet and younger people*

are not met on classic election booths out there somewhere on the market.
They walk past. Maybe looking at their phones and not even registering you
standing there" (Strategic).

During the interviews, the most commonly named target group are voters
and potential voters, however some parties also address their members on
social media. The interviewees explain that the option for mass communica-
tion is utilized to address multiple target groups at once and the low barrier
of digital formats is used to open the gates to new target audiences of whom
the parties cannot get a hold of offline. Getting in touch with younger audi-
ences through social media is a shared aspiration of all parties. They never-
theless acknowledge special challenges with this target group, because they
in particular are highly segmented, cannot be addressed on all platforms and
tend to switch platforms rather a lot.

However, all parties agree that the reach of social media is limited and that
there are certain target audiences that cannot be addressed through social
media platforms. Therefore, social media cannot fully replace offline com-
munication: "*One has to do both and address people where they are*" (Stra-
tegic).

Integration of Social Media in the German Federal Election 2021

Now that the potential and the possible advantages of social media for po-
litical communication are known, the integration of social media during the
election campaign for the federal election 2021 and for election campaigns
in general can be examined.

All interviewees stated that they integrated social media into their overall
campaign strategy and communication from the start of their campaign plan-
ning, partly even as their main campaigning tool. Some parties also say that
they used social media as a replacement for offline formats during the
COVID-19 pandemic.

When putting measures into place, the parties would choose between cop-
ying and adapting traditional elements or creating new content. When asked
about who the communicators are, the interviewees mention candidates and
political actors themselves or professional communicators and departments.
According to their recollections, individual communicators such as candi-
dates play an important role by making the party appear more approachable
and giving candid insights into political life. Both small and large parties claim
that they invest relatively high amounts of financial resources into pushing
digital content to achieve more attention. Interestingly, only one interviewee

claimed to use external service providers; all other parties chose inhouse departments.

During the interviews, it becomes clear that most strategic goals of the parties for social media communication align with their previously set political goals. These depend on the target audience and are mainly a wide reach and to convey one's message to the audience. Ideally, they manage to convince them of their message to contrast themselves from other parties and put forward their own program. The interviewees explain that the aspect of conviction becomes more and more important as sole reach becomes less attractive. To achieve this, some parties set clear strategic goals, many parties however refrain from specifying their plans and measures this far. If strategic goals are defined, they are mostly organized in phases throughout the election.

The concrete integration of social media in the political communication of parties during election campaigns is particularly visible through the measures and formats that the parties decided to put in place and which were a successful contribution to their campaigning activities. The parties divide the meaning of "success" into two categories: The quantitative success of their formats, mostly meaning a wide reach, and the qualitative success, meaning for example successfully engaging and convincing the target audience of the messages sent.

"*And then they talk and then, I don't know, 100 people tune in live and can ask questions. And later it's online on YouTube and another 1000 or 500 watch it. Those are not breathtaking numbers, but if you continue like that you can achieve an incredible reach. And also more*" (Strategic).

All interviewees except for one can name specific formats that promise good chances of success in their social media communication. Interestingly, complexity is not a necessity for success; some interviewees elaborate on how entertaining, unorthodox, or even polarizing formats are quite popular independent of their form and complexity. The most important platforms according to the parties are Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and sometimes TikTok, alternative formats are used occasionally to address important target groups. The most important formats are pictures, tiles, and motion pictures, whereas videos are especially popular for information and entertainment purposes, for example to portray election topics, the everyday life of a politician, or as a questions-and-answers-format (Q&A). Paid formats were not mentioned as often as organic content and are mostly used when dealing with particularly important content, such as the official election

campaigning video. In addition, two parties claim that they support their own reach by cooperating with external actors who have a wide reach themselves.

Controlling Measures

It cannot be said a priori whether the aforementioned formats were actually successful during the federal election or if this is only based on individual perception. Therefore, it is especially interesting to take a look at the communication controlling measures and success rates of the different parties. These questions were exclusively asked during interviews with strategists since communication controlling is rarely a responsibility of politicians.

The majority of parties claim to implement concrete measures to control their communication activities during and after their launch. The reach of their activities is the most commonly measured aspect, and its success factor is discussed ambivalently: Some say that it directly indicates how well the message was conveyed, others are rather skeptical about this connection and do not believe in its efficiency. The interviewees explain that they collect their KPIs through clicks, interactions, likes, number of followers, views, and further usage data. The meaning of these results is often determined in relation to their offline equivalent, for example by comparing YouTube views with the attendance at a live event.

It strikes the eye with some interviewees that on a personal level, they judge and evaluate the success of their social media measures. However, there are no official and reliable measures or instruments that further prove their success. One interviewee claims for example that they estimate the number of supporters for their party through their own interaction with them on different platforms.

Some parties wish to move towards more qualitative measurements that involve a stronger focus on the degree to which measures could actually convince the audience of the conveyed messages. However, this poses a challenge since KPIs can barely provide this kind of information.

The interviewees view the results of these controlling measures generally positively: They describe their own achievements on social media as adequate and overall successful, even if the party was not successful in the overall election. Here it is important to point out that the interviewees claimed that the results of the election campaign do not permit a direct inference to the effectiveness of the social media campaign during the election.

A majority of the strategists that were questioned claimed to conduct benchmarking, including collecting inspirations through success and failures of other parties or comparing KPIs and budgets. It was also mentioned multiple

times that the parties are not only comparing each other's success but are actively copying formats, strategies and measures. Only one interviewee actually admitted to this, everybody else only stated that other parties were stealing from them.

"Well, of course you look at what others are doing. That's out of the question. And how they communicate, what ideas they have, that's evaluated and used as inspiration. It's a constant stealing and being ripped off yourself" (Strategic).

An interesting controlling measure that we took a closer look at is the internal coordination between the communicators within the parties. With a continuing professionalization of social media communication as described in the chapter "Development & Characterization of Social Media", it is interesting to examine whether such measures exist and how they are managed.
The first part of this question can be answered with both Yes and No for every party. The interviewees claim that the party members are given no specific directions from the communication departments but rather receive support through guidelines for social media communication. They implement this through motivations, coachings or guidelines, in some cases the communicators are even handed specific content like SharePics or Tools with which they can create their own material. Furthermore, only two interviewees stated that candidates' accounts are not run by the candidates themselves.

"It's not like our Fraction is giving us some guidelines on what they would say and what we can't say, I believe it's up to us and our own judgement to recognize that there's things you should or shouldn't say" (Political).

In addition, some parties state that the coordination between communicators is more intense during election campaigns. Most interviewees are content with the current coordination measures, some strategists however wish for more and better communication from members before they act on social media.

Challenges
After naming numerous advantages and positive aspects of social media communication, the challenges that the platforms and their functions pose for political communication cannot be forgotten. In previous chapters, we have already discussed the challenges of controlling the success rates of social media communication as well as the difficulties posed by younger

target audiences. The interviewees state several further challenges which can be divided into four sections: (1) General problems caused by social media, (2) challenges posed by specific formats, (3) resources, and (4) societal challenges.

The general problems listed by the interviewees are not exclusive for political communication and include numerous difficulties with the fast-paced environment of social media, filter bubbles, and fake profiles. In addition, several interviewees report technical difficulties with social media through data protection measures and complex algorithms.

The formats themselves are posing multiple challenges, beginning with their growing number, which makes it difficult to keep up with current trends, participating everywhere, and keep the upper hand in the broad competition to capture the audience's attention: "*It can be challenging, because there are so many rooms where you could reach people, and so many small groups. I see that as a future challenge*" (Political).

For political communication in particular, the parties complain that it is difficult to fit complex political topics into the sometimes short and simplifying formats social media provides. In addition, all parties agree that social media cannot and probably never will be able to completely replace human contact. The reason for this is mainly that not all target audiences can be addressed online and even if they could, the interviewees explain, many people prefer additional personal contact to a completely digital experience.

The third sector is probably the most pressing challenge which needs to be overcome soon to enable the social media communication of the parties to grow and develop: A generic lack of resources. Throughout the interviews, this appears to be a general problem of all parties no matter their size and does not only concern financial aspects. As described above, social media is relatively cost efficient compared to other communication instruments, however all parties still consider social media communication to be expensive considering financials, time, and personnel. Some interviewees note on this that they experience a reluctance from the party to allocate resources to their department because the necessity of social media communication is not properly understood or appreciated.

"*However, it is also very time intensive if you are serious about it. I mean, if you really have a certain number of followers who regularly want to connect with you, it can of course be very time intensive and you have to pay attention to how much [you invest]. I mean, when does it still make sense and when is it just too much?*" (Political).

The last challenge sector refers to overall societal problems that influence social media communication. All interviewees agreed that the uncivilized tone and treatment of each other have a negative influence on the communication environment, lead to hate and harassment, and need to be addressed in the future. Fake news and populism are identified as problematic issues that arise on different platforms as well as the power inequality between the parties, meaning that bigger parties with more money can affords a further reach. As a solution, the parties plead for more balance between democracy and freedom of speech and equipping social media users with more media competence. Different parties focus on different aspects to be most problematic, however there is generally no real disagreement.

The Future of Social Media in Political Communication

In all previous paragraphs, a detailed picture of the current status quo of social media communication by political parties was developed as well as their interests and intentions with it. To give the foundation for answering RQ3 correctly, we will, in the following, take a close look at the general development of social media communication of political parties as well as the concrete implications for future election campaigns and professionalization. Among the questioned, there is overall awareness that social media is undergoing constant changes, which is why they expect new trends and technologies to arise and other trends to become irrelevant. Interestingly, all parties agree that social media will not replace door-to-door campaigning, election posters and general offline communication in the near future. They expect personal contact to continue to play an important role and older generations are not expected to suddenly join social media.

"The traditional election poster has a relatively low mobilizing rate, that's what all our studies say. Online communication has a certain effect, but the strongest and really beating other measures by far is reality communication, meaning door-to-door campaigning. We expect door-to-door campaigning to have an enormously higher factorial efficacy than all other forms of advertisement added up" (Political).

Some interviewees admit they would wish for more digital ways of communication because it has lower barriers for target groups and is better for the environment than for example posters – they do not expect this to become reality though.

The parties plan on reacting to these developments again with further professionalization: Stocking up on staff, expanding social media departments,

increasing and improving their use of data, and making data analysis the foundation of their social media communication. For some parties, strategic planning is a rather emergent process, which is why they could not name precise plans for the future. Unfortunately, in both cases the parties cannot anticipate whether their plans can be put into place due to their great lack of resources.

Discussion

The aim of this study is to determine how the communicators of the parties of the German Bundestag evaluate and characterize the role of social media applications within their overall, party-specific communication. To investigate this, this paper looks at the integration of social media into the political communication in the past (RQ1), in the last federal election in Germany (RQ2) and in the possible future (RQ3). The results of the study reveal that social media is seen as an increasingly important communication channel by all parties. Simultaneously to this, social media practices and departments have gone through a vast professionalization. Consequently, the interviewees report on member apps, sharing platforms (as a way to provide content for politicians), communication courses and the expansion of the social media departments. However, this development goes hand in hand with different challenges. Mainly, communication practitioners struggle with keeping up with the rising time, staff, and money they have to invest into social media communication.

This evaluation partly contradicts previous assessments that view social media as a relatively cheap alternative to the traditional mass media (e.g., Leung & Yildirim, 2020, pp. 1–2.) and points to a stark development of social media communication. This can especially be seen by looking at the results of RQ1. According to the interviewees, the rise of social media as a communication tool in German parties started in 2013. This is fairly late compared to the U.S., where the presidential election campaign in 2008 is often seen as the beginning of using social media as a campaign method (Metzgar & Maruggi, 2009; Spaeth, 2009). While social media practices have become more relevant in 2017, the interviewees view the federal election of 2021 as the most digital election campaign. Beside the steady development of social media, interviewees point to the COVID-19 pandemic as another catalyst for the increasing use and importance of social media. This is especially true considering that many traditional election methods like canvassing or public events were not possible. Therefore, the first hypothesis to be tested in future research is:

H1: The pandemic has led to an increasing relevance of social media in the political communication landscape.

Aside from the raising use of social media in the political communication landscape, the interviewees also report differences in how social media was integrated into the federal election in 2021. Regarding RQ2, the communicators view social media as a symmetrical and dialogic means of communication as well as a direct channel to the people. However, while this statement is generally true for all parties, there still are many differences in how the parties design their content in detail. This finding confirms statements made by Fitzpatrick and Jöst (2021, pp. 419–423) who stress differences in how the parties realize their digital campaigns.

Still, most parties focus on staying in dialogue with their followers on social media and engaging them through these channels. Consequently, a shift in the functions of social media that are used by the parties can be noted. Magin et al. (2017) report in their study that the parties did not take advantage of the mobilization and interaction potential but rather focused on the information function of mainly Facebook. Back then, they name a lack of resources as a reason for this decision (Magin et al., 2017, p. 1714).

While the parties now focus on the interaction and mobilization function of social media, they still struggle with the same problem. Nowadays, the lack of resources mainly affects the number of social media platforms the parties use for their communication and the way they measure the performance of their activities. The raising professionalization as well as the speed in which new platforms, trends, and challenges for social media develop, bring about the speculation that the problem of lacking resources will only grow in the future. Consequently, these findings lead to a second hypotheses:

H2: The rising professionalization of social media practices in the political communication increases the need for resources in the respective parties.

Looking in the future, the results of RQ3 show that the parties rarely have a clear vision or strategy for the future development of their social media communication. Rather, the development and professionalization in this field seems to be an emergent process. Still, the interviewees stress their efforts to further train the members of their parties and to use big data to measure their activities and improve their targeting. The last point also lines up with research by Elías Zambrano et al. (2019, p. 1052), who also stress social media monitoring as an emergent research perspective. This apparent plan

of the parties to further professionalize the social media activities, leads to the last hypothesis:

H3: The increasing relevance of social media will lead to a further professionalization of practices and applications in the political communication.

The interviewees also note that, while social media is becoming increasingly important, it will not replace traditional political communication methods. Therefore, it can be speculated that social media will remain an additional communication tool.

For practice, social media has lost its status as a simple tool to reach target groups in a cost-effective way. It has become a central measure in the election campaign where political parties have to be present in order to remain competitive. The interviewees especially stress paid campaigns as a method to reach a wide audience. This increasing relevance also shows that practitioners in the political communication landscape need to allocate more resources to social media practices. If parties want to keep up with the arising trends and challenges for social media platforms, they must provide the needed budget to do that. Here, the performance measurement becomes increasingly relevant since it makes it possible to make educated decisions on communication measures and the target groups. Just measuring the coverage of a campaign probably will not be a sufficient data basis in the future. Additionally, the fast transition of the platforms shows that the communicators of the parties need to bear the trends and target groups in mind. Practitioners who know where their target groups are and what kind of content they want to see, will successfully communicate with them. However, this – again – remains a matter of resources and therefore emphasizes that investing in social media will pay off.

While this study offers extensive insights into the political communication landscape, there are also some limitations that need to be considered. Firstly, the sample must be critically reflected upon. Since this research took on a qualitative approach, only one or two representatives of each party have been interviewed. Thus, the results offered are vast but cannot be generalized, especially beyond the German political landscape. Additionally, the distinction between "political" and "strategic" officials may be blurred due to the wide differences between the job titles of politicians and communication professionals. Since the job titles of some participants are very traceable, a "clearer" distinction would have caused problems with the anonymization. Another thing that should be added is that the study has been conducted shortly after the federal election in Germany which is why many higher officials could not participate due to a lack of time.

Secondly, the method of semi-structured interviews leads to some limitations. Effects such as interviewer bias, reactivity, and social desirability cannot be ruled out. In order to still achieve variable and reliable results, several measures such as complete transcripts, different coders and a system of categories were taken.

Conclusion

Social media has become an essential communication tool for both strategic and political practitioners in the political landscape. In contrast to traditional channels in the election campaign (like election posters or canvassing), social media offers parties the possibility to target specific audiences and profit from increasing scopes of especially paid campaigns.

In order to examine the state-of-the-art of the usage of social media in the German political sphere, the given paper strives to provide insight in how communication officers of the parties represented in the German Bundestag describe and characterize the role of social media applications within their overall, party-specific communication. To this end, previous research was discussed and subordinate research questions concerning the past, present, and future of election campaigning via social media were formed. To answer these questions, 13 semi-open qualitative interviews with both political and strategic officials of the eight parties represented in the German Bundestag were conducted and analyzed using a qualitative content analysis.

Altogether, a clear increase in both importance and professionalization of social media as a communication tool can be observed. Strategic and political officials consider social media as increasingly important in the election campaigns – though they do not think that these channels can replace traditional campaigning methods like canvassing. With this gain of significance, communication officials also professionalize working with social media.

Practitioners for example offer apps, sharing platforms, or communication courses to the politicians and communicators of their respective parties and work on expanding their social media departments.

However, all parties seem to be facing a common problem: While social media used to be seen as a cheap and easily implemented tool, it is becoming increasingly time consuming, labor-intensive, and costly. This leads to a paradoxical development: Although both political and strategic officials consider social media as highly important in the political communication landscape, the resources that the parties allocate to their social media communication are too slim.

In order to deal and keep up with trends and challenges that social media entails (e.g., the multitude of channels or Big Data), German parties need to

increase the resources allocated to social media. This background also opens up directions for further research. Future studies should thus focus on the reasoning behind the scarcity of resources and its effect on the adoption of innovations in the political communication landscape.

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