



Politician 2.0: Information Behavior and Dissemination on Social Networking Sites - Gaps and Best-Practices

Evaluation results of a novel e-participation toolbox to let politicians engage with citizens online

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Abstract: *This article covers our findings on the information behavior and dissemination of parliamentary decision-makers using social networking sites like Facebook. The article investigates why politicians use these technologies and are increasingly integrating into their everyday workflow. In addition to determining the purpose of social network usage, the focus of our paper is also on best practices and on how to deal with challenges like the authenticity of politicians' online profiles. The results presented within the remit of this paper are the outcome of 16 semi-structured interviews that took place as part of an evaluation effort within the EU research project WeGov¹. The overall aim of the project is to develop a toolbox that enriches the dialogue between citizens and politicians on the Web.*

Keywords: Open Government, E-participation, German Parliament, Bundestag, Social Networking Sites, Interview

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This article covers the evaluation of the initial toolbox of the EU e-participation project WeGov – Where eGovernment meets the eSociety with different types of end-user groups. The evaluation results are part of the overall evaluation process in which politicians will systematically be integrated into the development process of the toolbox. The initial toolbox is intended to demonstrate the basic use case of testing a politician's statements on Facebook. Here, the end-user posts a statement onto a Social Networking Site (SNS) and runs the analysis components on the users' feedback. Injection and analysis are two main functionalities (Wandhoefer et al. 2011) which were extracted from all the designed use cases (Addis et al. 2010; Joshi et al. 2010). The initial toolbox (Claes et al. 2010) injects one decision-maker's statement into a Facebook test group, with the analysis running on a test bed of an Obama tweet with nearly 1000 comments. The current software prototype acts more as a demonstration tool to show that all components fit together rather than a ready-for use piece of software that would dominate decision-makers' everyday workflow.

This initial toolbox was presented to 29 assistants to members of the German parliament, in conjunction with a discussion on the WeGov approach, the basic use case and the different kinds of analysis that will be conducted as part of the toolset. The outcomes from this event were used to plan the evaluation process of the initial toolbox. Because the software is not yet able to demonstrably assess the analysis results for decision-makers, a semi-structured interview was conducted as part of the evaluation methodology in order to evaluate the WeGov approach and the

¹ WeGov – Where eGovernment meets the eSociety; URL: <http://www.wegov-project.eu/> (Retrieved Dec 2011)

concept of using the toolbox in a two-way dialogue. This interview also demonstrates the scenario of launching a questionnaire on social networking sites to gather citizens' opinions in a more structured way. The aim of this approach is more to test a statement than to create a representative online survey.

The semi-structured interview was conducted by GESIS with the head of the Dialogue and Campaigning department of a German party, one Member of Parliament (MP) from the state parliament of North Rhine–Westphalia in Germany and 11 assistants to members of the German parliament. It took place in June 2011. In addition, Gov2u carried out three semi-structured interviews with members of the EU parliament (MEP) in July 2011. The main themes that emerged from the evaluation process include:

- Decision-makers already post on SNS for public relations purposes.
- They monitor particular topics, groups and profiles on Facebook and Twitter.
- MPs use information services like the one provided by the German parliament on a daily basis to get keywords related to, and summaries of, the most important newspaper articles.
- This way of presenting information, which is also used for the hot topic opinion analysis within the WeGov toolset, is already familiar to end-users.
- This contradicts original thinking that decision-makers primarily do not want to monitor the feedback on their own statements. Increasingly, they tend to use analytic tools – such as the ones being created as part of the WeGov toolset – to find influential groups or users in order to find suitable places to disseminate their messages.
- Despite having a tool that makes it easy to inject and monitor decision-makers' own statements, they are looking for tools that can be applied to other people's online engagement. They clearly want to have both: an easy way to initiate a dialogue with citizens and a tool to obtain an information advantage in terms of social media.

1. WeGov - Where eGovernment meets the eSociety project background

The WeGov project was funded with support from the European Commission under the SEVENTH FRAMEWORK PROGRAMME THEME ICT 2009.7.3 ICT for Governance and Policy Modeling. The project develops a novel e-participation toolbox to let politicians engage with citizens on SNS like Facebook and enrich the two-way dialogue. The toolbox core consists of the hot topic opinion analysis (Sizov et al. 2011; Naveed et al. 2011) and the user behavior analysis (Rowe et al. 2011A; Rowe et al. 2011B; Angeletou et al. 2011). The tools support decision-makers with functionalities like summarizing huge text corpuses with keywords as hot topics and linking them with additional textual user opinions. Instead of developing a new e-participation platform, WeGov is built upon the capability of accessing public discussions on SNS. At the time of writing, WeGov is in its 20th of 30 project months and is exploiting the current evaluation results to develop the final toolbox with functionalities for politicians' everyday workflow.

2. Interview with parliamentary decision-makers

The evaluation of the initial toolbox was conducted in two steps. First, the software and the basic use case were presented to 29 assistants of members of the German parliament. Then, the implementation of the toolbox and the e-participation approach pursued by WeGov were discussed in detail. Some of the results were used to modify the basic use case (Joshi et al. 2011). The processing of the feedback from the discussions showed that the previous development of the WeGov toolbox had made some assumptions about the needs within the daily work of decision-makers that need to be verified. A semi-structured interview was designed to gather more structured feedback from policy-makers in order to address this point. For each interview 20 to 30 minutes were scheduled, with no need for preparation for the interviewees. In most cases, the interview developed into a discussion of half an hour to two hours.

In order to see whether the WeGov toolbox will satisfy the needs of policy-makers, the interview was designed to verify the assumptions about their everyday workflow, as these are included in the basic use cases and software solutions. For example, Abgeordnetenwatch.de² is one of the most famous e-participation platforms in Germany, giving citizens the opportunity to ask questions to German MPs. Unlike this kind of platform, which establishes self-contained e-participation, WeGov assumes that politicians generally need to be involved in SNS. Therefore, the first part of the interview examines whether policy-makers think that they need to go on SNS and, if so, for what purpose. The interview is designed to establish what efforts are already being undertaken to work with SNS. In addition, the needs and problems in dealing with the SNS should be determined. After getting a better idea of the current online engagement of politicians, the WeGov solution can be better compared with the real needs.

3. Direct feedback on the WeGov toolbox and its Basic use case

The WeGov approach, connecting with already existing social network sites, was justified – one of the original feedback statements was "fishing where the fish is". Furthermore, having just one interface to use all of the relevant social networking sites was seen as very helpful. It makes it easier to spread information widely and monitor groups, profiles or topics without having knowledge of particular SNS functionalities.

The underlying metaphor for what is implemented with the analytic tools in the first prototype is something similar to the pattern of press relations. Most of the decision-makers have realized the benefits of the WeGov analysis tools beyond the implemented loop of testing a particular statement, but they mentioned the problem of reduced feedback. The interviewees suggest having tools for monitoring Facebook groups in order to find the appropriate group in which to place their statement. An illustrative question here is: What is possibly the biggest, most agile and serious anti-nuclear waste group in which to post about the policy-maker's engagement against nuclear storage? One main benefit of the WeGov toolset, highlighted by a number of decision-makers, should be the ability to place a geographical restriction on analysis and search results to find local groups, people, events and topics – the reason being that members of the state, federal and EU parliaments are interested in connecting with their constituents and in knowing the key topics that these citizens are interested in.

Another desired feature would be to predict the hot topics of tomorrow. As a combination of hot topic extraction, opinion mining and discussion activity, some decision-makers asked about the possibility of tracing the ups and downs of emotional categories. If anger decreases after a certain political decision this could somehow be seen as the impact of political work.

Since the political debate is often driven by a few emotive keywords, stakeholders need to know whether a certain keyword is typically controversial, polarizing or common sense. Analyzing such buzz is possibly another monitoring feature for the future of WeGov.

4. "Politician 2.0 up close and personal with short track to the citizen"

All interviewees are "experts" in using SNS and have at least one online profile. The preferred SNS are Facebook, Twitter, the video platform YouTube and XING³, the biggest platform in Germany for business contacts. Some politicians use wer-kennt-wen⁴, one of the biggest SNS in Germany, which is geographically restricted to some German states – this fact makes it attractive for reaching people in a particular location. SNS and Web 2.0 technologies, and forms of parliamentary democracy, are both working fields for every German party, with several offices working on those topics. The reason for the use of these networks is slightly different and is based

² Abgeordnetenwatch; URL: <http://www.abgeordnetenwatch.de/> (Retrieved Dec 2011)

³ XING; URL: <http://www.xing.com> (Retrieved Dec 2011)

⁴ Wer-kennt-wen; <http://www.wer-kennt-wen.de> (Retrieved Dec 2011)

on their characteristics. It is fair to approximately summarize that YouTube and Twitter are primarily used for dissemination, Facebook is used for dialogue, while XING and LinkedIn are used to search for profiles.

Politicians assume that many people seem to think that they are “far away” from real life problems. Politicians themselves are worried about the declining interest in politics on the part of the electorate. No matter the reasons for that gap, Web 2.0 techniques appear to be a bridge between the policy-maker and citizens. The common wish is therefore to engage with citizens in a fast, uncomplicated and transparent manner. With the use of Web 2.0 tools, policy-makers expect a better engagement of e-citizens within the “decision making process”. The following examples showcase some best practices for politicians using SNS.

One standard use for SNS is to publish press releases. The problem with press releases is that they will usually also be read by politicians; in this case the information will be interchanged between politicians and not between citizens. To overcome this limit, most of the respondents have considered the following strategy: publishing a press release with a certain statement; publishing the same information on the politician’s homepage; sharing the press release on the politician’s Facebook page; and circulating it on particular mailing lists.

One general purpose of using SNS is spreading information to increase popularity. It is an easy way to expand one’s reach. Most interviewees tweet and post about their political work (e.g. being interviewed, working in certain commissions, holding conferences) or private affairs (e.g. aircraft delay, being a fan of a certain football team). Mostly they inform about their political work without being polarizing. The main intention is to increase their presence and not to start any kind of discussion, because they are often afraid of the uncontrollable evolution of the content in heated public debates, which tend to be unstructured.

In order to distinguish between the private person and the professional politician on Facebook, a common pattern is to have both a profile and a fan page. Some only have a fan page because of the restriction in Facebook on the number of friends in a profile to 5000. More pages or groups (Groups on Facebook, hash tags on Twitter) were created for certain political committees, commissions and concerns. For instance, the committee of enquiry of the German parliament is represented on Facebook and tries to engage citizens’ opinions into the decision-making process.

Entering a dialogue with citizens is a major purpose for using SNS. Facebook is a readily used platform for this. Policy-makers post political statements as well as personal preferences. Some of them ask about concrete topics to be discussed in an upcoming committee, others talk about things with only a social relevance – such as privacy and transparency on the web. Another typical issue is sport, something far away from controversy. That is because most of the policy-makers are afraid of the uncontrollability of any on-going discussion, because it could have a negative impact on their reputation.

In order to address people who are already politically active, policy-makers search for Facebook groups with which to officially agree. Members of such groups are possibly easier to win over as followers of their own party. The purpose is getting in touch with influential people or potential electors, as well as generating a citizen-friendly appearance. For example, presenting oneself as a fan of women’s soccer by posting on football events might appear emancipated, citizen-friendly, sportive and also experienced in using new media. One such example comes from Halina Wawzyniak, a German MP posting about the women’s football World Cup.

A good opportunity to get more user comments on a statement and to start a dialogue with citizens is the use of a “one question tool”. The advantage is that policy-makers may cover certain statements behind a question. One such example comes from Manuel Hoferlin, a German MP who is responsible in the field of political strategy for the Internet. Figure 1 shows the screenshot of his Facebook page⁵, where he asked his friends: “What do you think of a Facebook profile with expiration date?” He was using the question tool ‘Facebook ask’ by simply adding two alternative

⁵ Facebook page of Manuel Hoferlin (German MP); URL: <http://goo.gl/ZZwJ7> (Retrieved Dec 2011)

pre-formulated answers and allowing the addition of new answers. Manuel Hoeflerlin presented the questionnaire results on his blog⁶, where he evaluated the answers of about 60 Facebook friends.



Figure 1: Facebook profile of Manuel Hoeflerlin (Member of German Bundestag)

The main purpose of doing such a survey is to engage in a dialogue with citizens on the web without necessarily having a pointedly worded political statement. Asking people in such a way tends to become a form of participative politics and not just a statistically representative survey. Since the friends of those who answer that question will be informed about that fact, it increases the presence of the decision-maker a bit. Another benefit of this tool is the opportunity to gather spontaneous opinions. Sometimes they are also used as early pre-tests in preparation for a larger survey. There is no strong need for decision-makers to use those questionnaire tools to produce more empirical data, because high quality data is available through several information services like Infratest dimap⁷ or forsa⁸.

Another strategy consists of asking SNS users for questions that should be asked in certain committees, commissions or meetings as a direct way of realizing e-participation. A positive effect of using this tool is that it acts as an icebreaker for starting a two-way dialogue with citizens. One example, an MP told us, is "Today I am going to meet the Families Minister – what should I ask?" The impact of this statement was significant and it opened a meaningful discussion on the topics the politician wished to broach.

With the success of Barack Obama's Web 2.0 campaign during the last election, Web 2.0 campaigning is increasingly becoming a topic for policy-makers in Germany. The objective is a bigger use of Web 2.0 tools, with a focus on Facebook, for the upcoming elections. The challenge is to address the e-citizens within the policy-makers' constituency and get into a two-way dialogue.

5. A fresh insight into opinion mining - "An unobserved look-out"

Press work is a major part of a policy-maker's everyday workflow. In contrast to the information behavior on SNS, the following examples demonstrate that the German parliament offers its MPs some very structured information services.

The German parliament offers a comprehensive information service to support the MPs' press work within the everyday workflow. Hot topics like "Afghanistan", "Libya" or "Fukushima" are accessible through the German parliament's intranet daily. Each topic is manually extracted from the major German newspapers and is ranked by prominence. All topics are linked to an abstract and each abstract is linked to the original news source.

⁶ Blog of Manuel Hoeflerlin (German MP); URL: <http://goo.gl/jRfD5> (Retrieved Dec 2011)

⁷ Infratest-dimap; URL: <http://www.infratest-dimap.de/en/> (Retrieved Dec 2011)

⁸ Forsa; URL: <http://www.forsa.com/> (Retrieved Dec 2011)

In addition, each MP may have his or her own list of search terms about which information is retrieved daily. From this perspective, stakeholders are already familiar with the information technologies that they are offered in WeGov – depending on hot topic extraction and search term results. They search for newspapers mentioning their name and summarize the daily news with single terms. So far, this information service is limited to newspapers, but it is certainly possible to extend that to SNS in the near future.

Gathering information from SNS is becoming more and more important for the policy-makers' everyday workflow. In contrast to the very structured, comprehensive information services hosted by the German parliament, the team members of the MPs gather user opinions and topics as well as user profiles from SNS with different strategies and for different purposes. The information behavior seems to be structured in terms of where to find the right information for a particular purpose. Below are some examples of how policy-makers use SNS for press issues – getting user opinions, topics and profiles.

SNS are investigated to find journalists or other disseminators, experts or opinion leaders to receive MPs' press releases. A common pattern is searching business platforms like XING or LinkedIn for political journalists or experts and searching their discussion topics on Facebook to investigate their political opinion

Another information interest is profiling the political opponent. Every political grouping has got someone responsible for external representation, providing aggregated information about the group's main issues. With Twitter, policy-makers try to find those responsible in the following way: looking at Twitter for a list of followers of a certain politician; within the list, finding those with the most re-tweets; those are candidates to follow in order to be informed about the political opponent. This information behavior is like an information channel which works automatically instead of parsing websites manually.

Very similar to the information service of the German parliament (see above), Google Alert is used to automatically notify policy-makers via email about searches. Some policy-makers also use tools like TweetDeck to aggregate social information.

Information extraction is also the main interest of those groups of politicians who are responsible for a more general and institutional task in their party (e.g. public relations or campaigning) or members of parliamentary blocs. Since they do not really need to know how to be personally re-elected in their local constituency, they are more interested in general party-political issues. Those policy-makers more often use Google Trends to analyze the ups and downs of certain political topics because they need to follow the activity on topics on which the party members must take a stand. They are also inclined to look at blogs or the comments of online newspapers.

Decision-makers with a more general perspective are interested in looking at particular Facebook discussions without having any influence on the results. In online discussions, one usually finds both the most determined supporters and opponents of certain topics. However, the majority of people are more passive in the discussion (perhaps just reading) and hence difficult to find or to follow. In order to identify general topics it would be better to somehow trace those dialogues which the majority is involved in. For this purpose, Facebook is the most interesting platform, because on Facebook users possibly write without thinking much about being published. This is different from Twitter; on Twitter, everyone more or less writes consciously for the "public". Politicians with such interests are looking for a way to get an unobserved look-out. They don't want to make statements; they just want to monitor Facebook dialogues without being detected. Often they do not even want to specify a search topic, but simply search for the most discussed topics in Facebook. For the analysis tools this means that utterances from people with fewer total comments should somehow be weighted more in terms of content and meaningfulness rather than just in quantity of posts.

6. The problem with authentication of politicians' online profiles

Some of the policy-makers don't think that there really is disenchantment with politics in Germany. They think that the reason for lower citizen engagement with political topics is based more on the authenticity of the policy-makers' profile, in the digital world as well as offline. Two major problems in handling social network sites are highlighted. A German parliamentarian has a team that sometimes also works on the MP's online presence. Usually every team member uses his own profile on Facebook instead of writing with the MP's profile. This is done because of the risk that someone might have doubts that they are actually talking to the real politician and not to one of the MP's assistants. This leads to the second problem, that the online engagement of a single politician can't be very intense. Furthermore, most of the assistants had to deny their online engagement with the parliamentarian they are working for. In effect, this was not found to be very dialogue-oriented. The main issue here is one of 'Trust'. Citizens and policy makers alike need to be able to trust both the medium of dialogue and its target audience before they fully open up and engage in any meaningful manner.

Policy-makers seem to have a strong awareness of authenticity issues concerning their public profile on SNS like Facebook and Twitter. The interviewees assume that users on SNS can't guess that the online profiles of MPs are "not real", i.e. posts and tweets coming from the MP's staff. A communication with an MP is therefore actually with one of the MP's staff members. The policy-makers respond to this criticism that this is due to a lack of time. Using social media is time consuming, and engaging in a two-way dialogue also requires a lot of time. This work is therefore often done by the MP's staff and without an authentication of the creator. In fact, policy-makers want to dive into a two-way dialogue with citizens to get their opinions on particular topics. And since MPs cannot answer the questions and comments alone, they need support from their staff because it looks like MPs are getting more and more fans on Facebook and followers on Twitter.

In Germany there are many MPs with a private profile on Facebook instead of a fan page. MPs assume that citizens feel closer to them in a friends' connection rather than through a fan page. The problem is that Facebook accepts only 5000 friends, and more and more politicians are passing this limit and can't accept more friend requests. There are some best practice examples for politicians to deal with the described gaps.



Figure 2: Facebook profile of Hans-Christian Stroebele (Member of German Bundestag)

Hans-Christian Stroebele is one of 620 MPs of the German Parliament. He is a member of the Bündnis 90/Die Grünen party and one of the oldest MPs. In August 2011 his private profile on

Facebook reached the limit of 5000 friends and he and his team started the Hans-Christian Stroebele fan page⁹. To handle the situation he recorded a YouTube video¹⁰ to explain to his 5000 Facebook friends that a new page was needed and that he was asking them to switch to the new page. Figure 2 shows the YouTube video, which was posted by his team on his private Facebook wall. The main message of the post and the video is that he is very sorry for the change because he prefers being friends than to click on a “Like” button to be connected, but that is how it works; but everyone who clicks on the like button will be seen as a friend, he adds. Hans-Christian Stroebele also says in the video message that he is pretty new to this technology and that his team supports him very strongly in the field of SNS and does its best to reach citizens and to ensure that citizens’ opinions reach him. Because of the lack of time, he is not able to maintain the different profile sites alone; the most important thing is that users know who they are communicating with. All posts and tweets which are not created by Stroebele are tagged with (Team Stroebele). This tag gives Stroebele and the citizens the opportunity to authenticate the team writing this particular comment and include his team into the communication process with users.

This opportunity of authenticating the team as author is also used by Halina Wawzyniak MP of the German parliament and member of the party Die Linke. She and her team are very active on SNS. She deals with the problem of the team writing comments in her name and using her online profile in the same way as Stroebele. Figure 3 shows the Twitter profile of Halina Wawzyniak with a selection of three tweets. The second tweet is tagged with #buerotweets – the translation is #officetweets and transparently identified the team writing the message.



Figure 3: Twitter profile of Halina Wawzyniak (Member of German Bundestag)

7. Discussion

The interview findings covered within this article are evaluated with 16 decision-makers in total – one head of department of Dialogue and Campaigning from a German party, one MP from the state parliament of North Rhine–Westphalia, 11 assistants to members of the German parliament and three members of the EU parliament. The German parliament has 620 MPs and a multitude of parliamentary staff working for them. The results are therefore not representative because of the comparatively low number of interviewed politicians and because they were not selected stochastically. The fact that the interviewees represent a particular group that is interested in SNS, Open Government and e-participation issues needs to be taken into account. But concerning the needs of the WeGov toolbox evaluation – e.g. evaluating the basic use case – the results provide good insight into the information and dissemination behavior on SNS with a focus on MPs of the German parliament.

⁹ Fan page by Hans-Christian Stroebele; URL: <http://goo.gl/mCaXO> (Retrieved Dec 2011)

¹⁰ YouTube statement to switch on the fan page; URL: <http://goo.gl/xC9DN> (Retrieved Dec 2011)

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