

Analysis of MPs and social media during the 2011 elections in Finland

Työryhmä F7: Teknologiavälitteistä viestintää: Viestinnän ja verkon tutkimuksen rajapinnoilla

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The impact of the Internet and lately, the social media, on political decision-making is a topic widely studied. Researchers have focused on e.g. how citizens receive information via the Internet (Adamic & Glance, 2005; Strandberg, 2008) how Internet is used to support self-organizing social movements (Dutton, 2009; Castells, 2007) and how the Web changes political campaigning and the political environment in total (Strandberg, 2009; Lilleker et al., 2011; Davis, 2005; Davis, 2010; Gibson et al., 2008). This research contributes to the last research focus by examining the situation in Finland during the 2011 elections and in social media domains (c.f. Larsson & Moe 2011, Lassen & Brown 2011). The exact research question is which candidates used social media services during the elections and how interactive their use was.

Compared to traditional media, such as newspapers and television, Internet allows everyone to publish content. Furthermore, special element in social media is the possibility to create interaction between the audience and the “performer”. Scholars have been interested on this interactivity and the application it offers for political participation and e-democracy (e.g. Davis, 2005, Lilleker 2011, Dahlberg, 2001, Jensen 2003). The results mostly indicate that the level of interactivity has not been especially high (e.g. Lilleker 2011).

In this study, we focus both on presence in online sphere and characteristics of the political communication in the online sphere. We have selected social networking sites Facebook and Twitter, and candidates’ blogs as the services in focus. For each service we collected basic information on the MP’s activity, such as the number of Tweets during the campaign period and after it. We try to explain the differences with basic demographics (age, sex, level of education), resources available (campaign costs and party’s position in the 2007 parliament) and power and publicity (whether the party was in cabinet, how long the candidate has been a MP, and if the candidate is a public figure).

Our results show that these different media are used in different ways, which demonstrates the importance of examining several different channels. The most popular social media among the MP’s were blogs ($n_B=176$), followed by Facebook ($n_{FB}=112$), and Twitter ($n_{TW}=78$). Our results indicate that blogs have become mainstream in political communication

followed by social networking services; however multimedia sharing platforms (Flickr, YouTube) were not widely used.

The analysis reveals that in all platforms younger people were more likely to be present (cf. Stranberg, 2008), but sex and education provided mixed results in the analysis. The ratio of budget on information technology increased changes of being present in online sphere, but these results were non-significant. Being a major party decreased changes of being in Facebook by half, but the True Finns and a major change in seat numbers may have cause this result. Being a public figure increased likelihood of being present by factor of two and half, but this result again is below statistical significance ($p=0.059, 0.098, 0.148$).

Most of the established parties were present in social media - except the True Finns whose presence was limited to Facebook only. When looking at the numbers of followers and fans, Green League ($n_{FB}=7371, n_{TW}= 2764$), National Coalition Party ($n_{FB}=4488, n_{TW}= 2108$), and Finnish Social Democratic Party ($n_{FB}=4227, n_{TW}= 1562$) were the vote-pullers in social media. True Finns position in Facebook is especially significant ($n_{FB}=15\ 055$), which can be taken as evidence for the increased popularity of the party in the 2011 elections. However, in general there doesn't seem to be a link between success in elections and social media presence nor popularity.

For interactivity, we studied whether commenting on one's blog was allowed. From the 176 candidates, 108 allowed comments in their blog. Here the only statistically significant factor was party's position in cabinet: candidates from those parties were 70 % less likely to allow commenting. The ratio of comments and blog post was also studied. We observed that candidate's level of education increased this ratio, also being a public figure and spending money on ICT increased this ratio, however these were not statistically significant.

In Facebook and Twitter, we examined the number of friends and followers. When adding elements of social activity, such as number of the posts, the overall explanation power of the model was improved. Increasing age decreased the number of followers ($p=0.044, < 0.000$), otherwise the results were mixed or non-significant (cf. Lassen & Brown, 2011).

Overall, all the models have rather low explanation power (r^2 usually between 0.10 and 0.20), indicating that other factors are more pivotal on this issue. This study has the limitation of only focusing on the selected channels, and thus for example ignoring online discussion forums, which being extremely popular in Finland may also be relevant parts of one's presence. Secondly, this study only examines the 200 elected candidates and not all of the candidates in the election, which excludes many possible interactions related to electoral success. In this exploratory study the selection was made to limit the amount of data collected.

Lähteet

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