Signe Bock Segaard

6 The Institutional Anchoring of Social Media Venues as Arenas for Local Political Communication. Perceptions by Voters and Politicians

6.1 Introduction[10]

In today's digital world, there are no obstacles preventing conversation and the flow of information in terms of time or space. This is the case across the whole world. Information and communication technology infrastructure are global and are considered two of the most important drivers of development and growth (United Nations, 2015). However, there are many prerequisites for such a positive impact, and not all countries have equivalent conditions to ensure this. Nordic countries, however, are in a special category of frontrunners, and according to the World Economic Forum and INSEAD (2015, p. 13) this has been the case for several years:

> Europe is home to some of the best connected and most innovation-driven economies in the world. In particular, the Nordics-Finland (2nd), Sweden (3rd), Norway (5th), Denmark (15th), and Iceland (19th) – continue to perform well. Indeed, these five countries have featured in the top 20 of every edition since 2012.

This ranking refers to what extent information and communication technologies (ICTs) play a significant role in 'supporting inclusive growth' (World Economic Forum & INSEAD, 2015:3) and is based on the Networked Readiness Index 2015 that consists of indicators at different levels and in different sectors. Looking in more detail at the Nordic countries, it is not only at the societal, governmental and business levels that ICTs are implemented as driving forces but also at the individual level. In particular, social media play a prominent role in the way many people communicate and get information in everyday life (Enjolras, Karlsen, Steen-Johnsen, & Wollebæk, 2013).

With specific attention to one Nordic country, Norway, this article focuses on to what extent this status of ICTs as prominent channels for information and communication at different levels is reflected in people's attitudes to communication in the local political sphere. I ask how politicians and voters perceive social media venues as communication channels and to what extent they recognize social media venues as suitable arenas for local election campaigns.

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[10] The literature review, the methodological approach and analyses are partly based on previous work by the author (Segaard, 2015).

The conditions for communication between politicians and voters seem to be changing. This is not only due to the overall status of ICTs in society but the dynamic between offline and online media and between old and new media that creates a landscape characterized by an abundance of information and communication channels. This can be understood in light of what Streeck and Thelen (2005) call 'layering', which implies an institutional anchoring of arenas for local political communication via a process. A new technology is developed, and people – politicians and voters – assume an attitude toward it. They converge in terms of their aims and the way in which they use the new technology. This forms the basis of an institutional process. If the institution – in this case social media as an arena for political communication between voters and local politicians – is accepted and active, it will regulate the behaviour of the actors and the behaviour will in return affect the institution. This implies a mutual influence between the behaviour and the institution (Barley & Tolbert, 1997, p. 94). Furthermore, the institutionalizing is about the expectations and perceptions of what arenas and channels for information and communication should be. Such expectations and perceptions will be significant for the institutional process because they guide people's behaviour, and it is through behaviour and underlying norms that institutions are established and maintained (Barley & Tolbert, 1997, p. 94). This approach to institutionalizing builds on neo-institutionalism's understanding of an institution as an relatively stable constellation of formal and informal procedures, norms, values and understandings that exhibit some regularities and that constrain the behaviour of the institution's members (Peters, 2005, pp. 18–19). In relation to this article, such an approach implies an assumption that social media venues as arenas for political communication over time will involve a constellation of actors – politicians and voters – who integrate and influence each other through formal and informal structures. In this way, social media are maintained as a communicative political institution.

An underlying premise for an institutional perspective on political communication in social media is that social media, just like other types of media such as newspapers and television, may be considered as an (potential) institution in the political sphere, as an arena for information sharing and communication between politicians and voters. It is well known that television is an established communicative institution for Norwegian political parties, individual candidates and voters. However, local newspapers have traditionally been and still are the most important information sources for voters in local election campaigns (Karlsen, 2011b, 2009a). Talking about the most important medium may, however, veil the fact that people – voters as well as politicians – usually use more than one medium to collect and share political information. The Internet and social media are relatively new arenas and may be used alone or in combination with other arenas for information and communication purposes (Segaard, 2013). In local election campaigns, it is the youth who use the Internet most as a political information platform. However, the Internet has become more important for all voter groups and politicians in the last decade (Karlsen, 2011b).

This development has resulted in different ideas of the democratic value of the Internet and social media as political communicative institutions, which is the point of departure for this article.

6.1.1 Institutionalization of Social Media Venues as Political Arenas

The rapid expansion of social media and the public's enthusiastic reception and use of it in everyday life seemed to promise an imminent revitalization of democratic processes. Social media venues provide a vehicle that allows people to get together and develop communicative communities in a virtual public sphere (Grönlund, Strandberg & Himmelroos, 2009). Social media are presumed to enable communication between citizens and politicians, a place to discuss issues and share opinions to a far higher degree compared to conventional means (Papacharissi, 2009; Shirky, 2008). In other words, social media could become an important arena for the public to debate political issues, where the voices of individual voters and politicians can be heard. But social media can also help campaigning politicians mobilize support and voters, thus enhancing their electoral chances in a direct way (Karlsen, 2011a). While expectations remain high in some places, the empirical evidence that social media are indeed such participatory political arenas has yet to manifest itself. Political communication online is still very often unidirectional, flowing from the parties and leading candidates to the voters (Karlsen, 2009b, p. 9; Strandberg, 2008) and is something that principally engages the already politically active (offline) (Segaard & Nielsen, 2013).

The reasons for this state of affairs stem from the digital divide perspective that emphasizes the socio-economic hallmarks of the actors and their political interests – the reinforcement hypothesis (Norris, 2001). This hypothesis states that the use of digital tools reinforces the democratic divides between specific socioeconomic groups of citizens; the already empowered groups – the socioeconomically privileged groups, especially men – become even more empowered. Although the research has provided many answers in addressing this issue, there are still gaps. While observers have focused on the use of social media, little is known about actors' perceptions of social media as platforms for political communication. However, to fully understand the institutional process, one should also take actors' perceptions into account, as they may be significant in terms of affecting their actions and thus the institutional anchoring of social media venues as arenas for political communication. This is because behaviour reflects underlying understandings of the media as a technological platforms of communication (Orlikowski & Gash, 1994). Previous research has failed to show whether the non-realization of the touted democratic benefits of social media is due to the actors having different perceptions. If social media venues are going to be generally recognized arenas for political communication between politicians and voters, both groups of actors need to recognize them as such. That is to say that social media as arenas for political communication should be institutionally

anchored with the central stakeholders, voters and politicians. This article attempts to remedy this situation with its focus on voters' and politicians' perceptions of social media.

If social media are ever going to become significant platforms for political communication between politicians and voters, both groups will need to perceive these media as a useful means of communicating (Jakobsen, 1960, p. 3). In other words, if the voters primarily consider social media as vehicles for private conversation or entertainment, it will not be easy for politicians to reach them via this method and get their message across. In this study, social media are represented by examples such as blogs, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube and Flickr.

In exploring the institutional anchoring of social media venues as political communicative arenas, the article asks to what extent politicians and voters consider social media as suitable arenas for communicating and exchanging political information. In doing this, the article maps voters' and politicians' perceptions of social media. Furthermore, the article discusses these perceptions in answering two underlying questions: Do voters and politicians tally with each other in how they view social media? Do the perceptions of voters and politicians have similar explanations at the individual level with regard to central background factors, such as gender, age, socioeconomic status and competence with new technologies?

The article explores these questions in light of the neo-institutional perspective of rational choice that explains 'the existence of the institution by reference to the value those functions have for the actors affected by the institution' (Hall & Taylor, 1996: 13; see also Segaard, 2010). It is about the actors' perceptions of the utilitarian value of social media in a political communicative context.

The context of the study is Norway. More than 90 percent of the Norwegian population has access to the Internet at home, and three out of five participate in social media (Statistics Norway, 2012). The young and middle aged have the highest involvement, but it is quite high – and increasing – among seniors. These statistics put Norway in the vanguard of the global information society (Eurostat, 2016). Social media, it is safe to say, are now an integral part of everyday life for most people in Norway. It should therefore be expected that users see social media as an important information and communication tool and as useful for many things, such as entertainment, private relationships and politics. The population density in Norway is relatively low and many places are geographically rather inaccessible; more than half of the 428 municipalities are small, with fewer than 5000 inhabitants. This makes social media particularly useful as a means of local political communication. It is also a fact that more than one third of the adult population have participated in at least one debate on the Internet; 22 percent have participated in at least one debate on Facebook (Enjolras, 2013, p. 119). The overall conclusion in recent Norwegian research regarding the political use of social media is that the reinforcement hypothesis is not confirmed in Norway (Enjolras et. al., 2013). In this sense, the Norwegian case may prove useful as *a critical case* in the use of social media as a vehicle enabling com-

munication between voters and politicians. One implication of such a critical case perspective is that if people – voters and politicians – are expected to value social media as useful platforms for sharing information, exchanging opinions and engaging in discussions on political matters, they would certainly be expected to do so in the Norwegian case. More generally, it implies that social media venues may be considered institutions for local political communication in Norway. Moreover, given the assumption that because Norway is a leader other countries will follow, it is reasonable to assume that the results may be valid for comparable countries.

The study is based on data from two identical questionnaire batteries concerning the views of voters and politicians on social media. The questionnaire batteries were used in two quantitative surveys, one of the general population (the voters) and one of political candidates in the 2011 local elections. The data – which reflect the same context, the same time period and identical battery items – give a unique opportunity to investigate the main question of this article – whether social media are perceived as suitable platforms for political communication.

The following section presents the framework of the study. It presents theoretical arguments for how to approach social media venues as institutions and reviews the main conclusions of previous research on social media as a political tool. The review forms the basis of the empirical hypotheses of the study. After presenting the methodological design and the dependent variables, voters' and politicians' views about social media are analysed. The concluding section summarizes the main results regarding the status of social media venues as arenas for political communication and discusses to what extent these new media are considered to be anchored as institutions for local political communication between politicians and voters.

6.2 Framework and Expectations

6.2.1 Rational Actors within Political Institutions

To understand the institutional process of social media venues becoming arenas for local political communication between politicians and voters in terms of common practices, norms and understandings, it may be useful to examine rational choice institutionalism (Hall & Taylor, 1996; Peters, 2005). Rational choice institutionalism contributes to understanding how and why social media may be anchored among politicians and voters because it highlights what may motivate stakeholders' behaviour and use of social media in a political context and thus the establishment of social media venues as communicative institutions.

The main argument in rational choice institutionalism is that 'human behaviour is instrumental in its nature and based on strategic calculation given an aim of utility maximization in relation to a specific goal' (Segaard, 2010, table 15 [author's translation]). In relation to this article, this implies an assumption that social media may be

established as a common communicative institution through a process of adaptation if voters and politicians perceive social media to be a useful way of communicating. The expectation of lower transaction costs is thereby considered to be the key driving force of the institutional process. In a political communicative context, transaction costs may refer to accessibility, time use and political influence compared to other media and information channels, such as television, radio, newspapers and husting events. It is rational for voters and politicians to prefer social media if they consider social media to be the most accessible, to require less time to use and/or to give the highest benefit with regard to influencing the political debate and the actors involved in the debate. The assumption implies an implicit comparison to other information and communication arenas; however, it does not mean it may be rational to prefer one arena only.

The rational choice perspective involves an instrumental approach to the concept of utility and to the question of the institutional anchoring of social media venues as arenas for local political communication between politicians and voters:

- Social media will become institutionally anchored among politicians as arenas for information and communication if they perceive social media to be useful means for communicating their politics and for reaching and convincing voters.
- Social media will become institutionally anchored among voters as arenas for information and communication if they perceive using social media to be an easy way to become informed about political matter and to communicate their political statements.

Due to the lack of previous research focusing on politicians' and voters' perceptions and expectations of social media, for the present purposes a close relationship between attitudes and actual behaviour is assumed. This assumption is based on institutional perspectives and social cognitive perspectives, such as the *technological frames model* of Wanda J. Orlikowski and Debra C. Gash (1994). The key argument of this model is that

> an understanding of people's interpretations of a technology is critical to understanding their interaction with it. To interact with technology, people have to make sense of it; and in this sense-making process, they develop particular assumptions, expectations, and knowledge of the technology, which then serve to shape subsequent actions toward it. (1994, p. 175)

Like Orlikowski and Gash, I also find it appropriate to consider the actors in question as members of different social groups – voters and politicians – each of which shares some common features. As two distinct groups, voters and politicians may have different interpretations of social media that are constrained by their different knowledge bases, objectives and the wider context. Therefore, it is likely to find incongruence in technology frames between voters and politicians. According to Orlikowski and Gash (1994:180), incongruence can lead to misunderstandings and difficulties

interacting and communicating and therefore failure in the institutional process of social media as arenas for political communication. Congruence is an important condition of successful communication between voters and politicians and thus the institutional anchoring of social media as arenas for political communication. However, given the view that politicians act strategically and rationally and that 'politicians' belief in the power of media increases their motivation and effort to appear in media' (Cohen, Tsfati & Sheafer, 2008, abstract), it is expected that their perceptions reflect their experiences with voters' actual behaviour and views. Therefore, it is hypothesized that consistency develops between politicians' and voters' respective views on what they consider to be appropriate platforms for communicating with each other. This expectation is in accordance with the concept of strategic calculation in rational choice institutionalism perspective.

One objection to this collective perspective on voters and politicians is that they are individuals and that people's characteristics and traits influence media perceptions and behaviours. Papacharissi and Rubin (2000, p. 180) underline the complexity of factors that determinate actual media use: 'Certain social and psychological factors, along with perceptions of the medium, should influence Internet use'. I agree – and indeed argue – that even if technological frames are a social phenomenon, they are individually held as well. This means that individual characteristics and traits such as gender, interests and competence may affect how a person perceives and uses social media in a political context. The analysis takes this perspective into account when the two groups are analysed separately in light of demographic, socioeconomic, political and ICT-related factors. The question is whether the social media frame is affected by individual background factors.

6.2.2 Previous Research on Social Media and the Implications of Individual Factors

With this rational approach in mind, this section draws on previous research on the actual political use of social media and formulates some expectations about voters' and politicians' perceptions of social media in light of individual background factors.

Since Pippa Norris introduced the reinforcement hypothesis in 2001, international research on political Internet communication and later on social media has almost unanimously concluded that there is no reason to expect the unique democratic potential of the online media to engage broad swathes of the public to automatically manifest itself in political communication. On the contrary, Norris argues the use of new media in the political space reinforces rather than reduces existing political inequalities between different groups of citizens (e.g. Enjolras & Segaard, 2011; Fuller 2004; Sipior & Ward, 2005; Strandberg, 2008; Torpe, 2007).

The reinforcement argument has undoubtedly proven its value, but the fact that times change – as do the technology available and people's use of it – justifies new

studies. This is especially the case in Norway because of the changes in the underlying conditions of inequality in access to and use of the new technologies. The question of accessibility is almost irrelevant in Norway, and the reinforcement argument is no longer confirmed by Norwegian empirical research (Enjolras et al., 2013, pp.:52, 130).

The conclusions of previous Norwegian studies are pertinent in this regard. The literature has found that the normalization of social media as communicative platforms for most Norwegians has impacted communication in general and communication within the political sphere in particular. Rune Karlsen (2011a) found that Norwegian politicians used social media extensively in the run-up to the 2009 national election. Social media receive a lot of public attention, although only a minority of voters actually visited politicians' blogs or examined their Facebook profiles. This finding – that politicians are more prone to use social media than voters – was confirmed in a study by Segaard and Nielsen on election blogs during the 2011 local elections. Politicians particularly use election blogs to communicate party-related information and to debate with other politicians (Segaard & Nielsen, 2012). Politicians writing election blogs are overwhelmingly male; however, in the use of social media with a private profile in the local election campaign, there were no gender differences among politicians. The researchers also found that young politicians are more likely to use social media than senior politicians and that politicians with a specific focus on young voters are bigger users of social media than their colleges. Furthermore, all other things being equal, high ICT competence seems to have a positive effect on politicians' use of social media in election campaigns, while education, income and political experience do not seem to matter as much. On this basis, the researchers conclude the use of social media in political campaigns may have a democratic effect on which of the politicians get to speak in public. This conclusion is supported by Danish studies as well (Hansen & Hoff, 2010, p. 19).

Regarding the voters and the population in general, recent Norwegian research on the political use of social media among young people found that social media venues are in fact operating as arenas for exercising active citizenship, although the use of social media as political tools is reserved to the few (Enjolras & Segaard, 2011). Moreover, people who use one online arena for political purposes are likely to use others as well (Enjolras et al., 2013, pp. 119–120). Social media do mobilize new groups to get (more) involved in politics as well. People with little political interest grow more interested over time from using social media. Overall, and looking at the political use of all kinds of social media and especially Facebook, gender does not seem to matter. However, in some social media venues, such as Twitter and blogs, the political debate is dominated by male users. Compared with other arenas hosting political debate, participants overwhelmingly tend to be younger people. The effect of education varies depending on the kind of political activity on social media. In general, education does not seem to have a significant effect on the political use of social media (for details, see Enjolras & Segaard, 2011). In more general terms, previous research has shown that Norwegian voters are indeed in the vanguard in using electronic tools

in democratic processes. One example is the trials with Internet voting in the local election in 2011 and the national election in 2013 where voters' use of and support of Internet voting was very high (Segaard, Baldersheim & Saglie, 2012; Segaard, Christensen, Folkestad & Saglie, 2014). The main reason for this is that voters' view Internet voting as an easy and practical way of voting. In other words, voters use Internet voting because it is a rational way of voting.

To sum up and to make clear the expectations about the implications of individual characteristics and traits, the reinforcement hypothesis is in general not confirmed by the Norwegian data; the political use of social media does not seem to support expectations created by the digital divide perspective to any great extent. Nevertheless, the most politically active people offline, who have a high degree of political interest, are still the most frequent users of social media for political purposes. However, the political use of social media does stimulate the political interest of people who originally had little interest in politics. Moreover, gender has no impact when looking at voters' political use of social media in general, including Facebook, but on other social media, male debaters are in the majority. The significance of age and education level are more noticeable but in a way that is inconsistent with the reinforcement argument. Given our framework, similar correlations between these individual background variables and perceptions of social media in a political context are expected. To what extent this is actually the case will be clarified in empirical analyses.

Overall, the expectation is that Norwegian voters and politicians view social media in a similar way, and more specifically that they to a great degree consider this new media platform as a suitable shared arena for exchanging political information and communicating. In other words, social media is expected to be considered as an important and useful institution for political communication. The analysis relies on the belief that the frames of social media as a new technology for political communication provide a background for understanding actual behaviour and the use of social media, that politicians act rationally and that Norway is a critical case.

6.3 Measuring Perceptions of Social Media

The study builds on empirical data derived from two quantitative surveys carried out in the weeks after the Norwegian local elections of 2011. Local elections at the municipal and county level are held every fourth year, and voter turnout is typically about 64 percent. A web-based questionnaire was addressed to all local politicians who were standing for election at the municipal and/or county level in the region of Sogn and Fjordane and who had a publicly[11] accessible e-mail address. Seventy percent

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11 Found using Google or through the political parties.

Table 1: Statements measuring perceptions of social media as political platforms.

NO.	Statement
1	Social media are important platforms in political election campaigns.
2	Social media are chiefly platforms for private conversations.
3	Social media are more apt for entertainment than for political debate.
4	I prefer to participate on hustings rather than to debate in social media.
5a	I prefer to write a letter to a newspaper rather than posting a letter on social media.
5b	I prefer to read a politician's letter in a newspaper rather than on social media.

of all politicians standing for election had such an address. In total, 780 politicians answered the survey (a response rate of 40 percent). Given that the region of Sogn and Fjordane has only small and medium-sized municipalities, the results of this survey can be generalized to many local politicians in small and medium-sized municipalities in Norway with a publicly accessible e-mail address[12]. Moreover, as there is no argument for saying that local politicians in Sogn and Fjordane are more technology-oriented than politicians elsewhere in Norway, the results of this study may be interpreted as a 'basic' picture of Norwegian local politicians' perceptions in general. In small municipalities, the perceived need for new channels of information and communication can be assumed to be smaller than in municipalities with bigger and more heterogeneous groups of citizens. However, this assumption is only partly confirmed by Norwegian research on political communication that states that the impact of municipality size has weakened over the last decade because municipalities have become more alike in their perceptions of the communication requirement (Haug, 2008, p. 112).

The other dataset comes from the Local Democracy Survey 2011 (LDS 2011), a representative population survey at the national level (for details, see Bergh & Christensen, 2013). The analysis uses LDS 2011 data obtained verbally by telephone and in writing through the postal service. The respondents in the telephone survey all received a postal questionnaire with more questions to answer. The questions relevant for this study were included in the postal questionnaire; therefore, only the 1,068 respondents who took part in both parts are included in the analysis. They make up 60.2 percent of all respondents in the LDS 2011.

The study uses a battery of five statements to measure voters' and politicians' perceptions of social media for entertainment, private and political use (see Table 1). Four of the statements were identical, while one (statement 5) was adjusted to fit a

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12 For details, see Segaard (2013).

voter's and a politician's perspective. This means that the I-person in statement 5a is a politician, while the I-person in statement 5b is a voter. The respondents were asked to respond to each of the statements by indicating their level of agreement on a four-point scale: 'agree completely,' 'agree in part,' 'disagree in part,' and 'disagree completely.' For statements 2–5, a high value (disagreement) indicates that social media are considered useful as political platforms, while the opposite is the case for the more general statement 1, which is without any objections.

Statements 1, 2 and 3 are more general in nature, while statements 4 and 5 are more practical as they refer to the respondents' preferences regarding their own participation in social media versus more conventional arenas for political communication. In accordance with rational choice institutionalism's stress on the actors' perception of the utilitarian value, it is the impression of *usefulness* at a general and practical individual level that in this sense is the key to understanding the implications of high or low perceptions.

6.4 Social Media as Suitable Arenas for Political Communication?

In this section, the analysis will throw light on whether politicians and voters consider social media in a similar way and more specifically as apt arenas for political information and communication. As argued by the technological frame model, this is an important condition for using social media as successful communication arenas for politicians and voters alike, and thereby also a significant condition for institutional anchoring of social media venues as arenas for political communication. The last part of the section identifies the factors that determine the perceptions of social media as suitable arenas for political communication by analysing these specific views in light of central background factors at the level of the individual.

6.4.1 Voters' and Politicians' Perceptions

Using the five statements presented in the previous section, the analysis will deal with voters' and politicians' perceptions of to what extent social media are suitable for political communication or whether social media are more appropriate for entertainment and private conversations.

The percentages in Figure 1 reveal that voters and politicians share many of the same perceptions of social media, although there are some interesting differences. For example, both voters and politicians are divided between those who recognize social media as apt political arenas and those who do not. However, politicians are in general more likely to see social media as platforms for political communication. More than 80 percent of politicians agree that social media are important in election
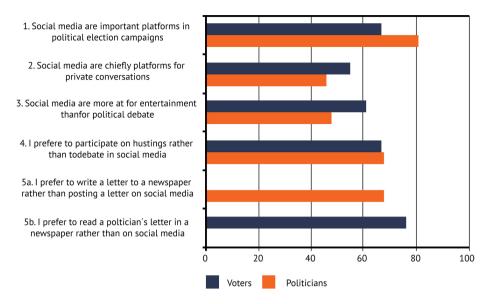
Figure 1: Voters' and politicians' perceptions of social media. percentage who partly or completely agree.
'Don't know' responses are coded as missing values. N_{voter}: 929–1026 $N_{politician}$: 704–735

campaigns, while the figure for voters is 67 percent. From an overall perspective, this indicates that the majority of voters and politicians have largely the same view of social media as tools for political communication in that sense they are cognizant of the role of social media in a political context. However, this is when no objections are mentioned.

When confronted with two popular ways of understanding social media – as arenas for private conversations and arenas for entertainment – slightly fewer than 50 percent of the politicians but 55–61 percent of voters agree that social media are better for these purposes. However, a large minority of both groups does not agree. In general terms, voters are slightly less focused on politics in social media than are politicians.

Regarding the more practical perceptions and how voters and politicians actually prefer to be informed about and participate in political matters, it is obvious that they have the same opinion about hustings versus debates in social media. Slightly less than 70 percent prefer participating on hustings, while about one in three do not prefer hustings to debating in social media. Given the fact that very few actually participate in hustings, this finding can be interpreted as a marked preference for face-to-face meetings rather than online meetings or perhaps just as a 'politically correct' answer. When it comes to the use of newspapers versus social media, a significant smaller share of politicians prefer to write a letter to a newspaper (58%) than voters who prefer to read letters to the editor (76%), in comparison with postings on social media. This difference could be a sign of a challenge regarding practical implications:

Table 2: Index measuring the perception of social media along a political/nonpolitical dimension, voters and politicians (descriptive statistics)

	Voters				Politicians			
	Mean	Std. deviation	Skewness	N	Mean	Std. deviation	Skewness	N
Index*	4.87	2.135	0.226	1001	5.60	2.095	-0.006	746

*Minimum and maximum is 1 and 10, respectively.

the messages of political actors do not always reach their intended recipients, the voters. But it is also the case that the number of voters who disagree with the statement is relatively significant (24%).

Looking at Figure 1, it is tempting to note the differences between voters and politicians and the fact that many have a positive opinion of social media as integrative political arenas. However, the differences are relatively small, and the proportion of voters and politicians who are more guarded in their praise is conspicuous.

To conclude, it is somehow clear that voters and especially politicians to a certain degree recognize social media as apt arenas for political communication at the general level, while at the practical level they – especially voters – prefer conventional arenas. However, a relatively large share of both groups recognize the political communicative role of social media.

To further explore voters' and politicians' perceptions of social media, a factor analysis of the five statements presented in Table 1 is carried out for both groups of actors. The principal components factor analysis of both indicator sets returns only one factor with an associated eigenvalue greater than one. This means that the data reveal a one-dimensional consideration of social media for both voters and politicians, which may be called *a political/non-political dimension*. In addition, a reliability test (Cronbach's alpha) shows a high degree of internal consistency of the indicator set, which means that the five items measure the same concept (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). However, the Cronbach's alpha is slightly greater for the politicians than for the voters (0.803 vs. 0.793, respectively), indicating that politicians are more clear in their assessment of social media as political rather than a nonpolitical platforms than are voters.

The further analysis of voters' and politicians' perceptions of social media will be based on the one-dimensional understanding of social media along a political/nonpolitical dimension. Based on the indicator set consisting of the five statements, two 10-point indexes have been constructed – one for voters and one for politicians. High index values indicate an understanding of social media as useful political platforms, whereas low values mean that this is not the case. Respondents who responded to at least three of the five statements are included in the index construction, and missing values are replaced by the average of the valid values. Table 2 presents each 10-point index by descriptive statistics.

Looking at the results in Table 2, it is worth noting that the index$_{voters}$ is slightly right-skewed and has a mean below 5, while the index$_{politicians}$ has a mean higher than 5 and is only very slightly left-skewed. This supports the overall conclusion that politicians in general and to a greater degree than voters recognize the role of social media as platforms for political communication, although a majority of both groups recognize social media as apt political arenas. The last point indicates a process of institutionalizing.

In the next section, possible explanations for voters' and politicians' views of social media are explored.

6.4.2 Explanation of the Perceptions: the Implications of Individual Characteristics

In the previous section, the analysis showed that voters' and politicians' views of the social media are rather similar, but also different in some ways. The question that remains to be explored is what explains voters' and politicians' respective views of social media. Based on the two indexes, index$_{voters}$ and index$_{politicians}$, regression analyses are carried out to determine whether certain demographic, socioeconomic, politics-related factors have an impact on opinions about social media as platforms for political communication. The rationale for choosing these specific background variables rests on earlier media research in general and research on the political use of social media more specifically, outlined in the previous paragraph.

Table 3 shows the results of regression analyses (OLS) carried out separately for voters and politicians. Model 1 shows the extent to which demographic and socioeconomic variables affect opinions of social media as political platforms. In addition to these background variables, ICT competence is included in Model 2 because it could affect how one views new technology. Model 3 shows the importance of the attributes of voters and politicians. The voter-specific variables measure political interest and participation (general political interest and participation in the local 2011 election (voted/not voted)) and political use of Internet (the use of the Internet as an information channel during the local election campaign). The politician-specific variables measure the politicians' familiarity with social media in a political setting (the use of social media with a private profile in the 2011 election campaign) and whether the politicians have a specific focus on young voters.

Before going into detail, it is worth mentioning that the adjusted R-squares suggest that the explained variance is considerably greater when the politician-specific variables are introduced into the politician analysis but only slightly greater when voter-specific variables are introduced. For voters, it is the inclusion of ICT competence that has the greatest significance for the explained variance.

Starting with the specific variables for voters and politicians in Model 3, the analysis shows some interesting results given the debate on the validity of the reinforcement hypothesis. The analysis reveals that political interest and participation

in elections have no significant influence on voters' opinions of social media. One implication of this is that social media as arenas for political communication does not 'repel' people with high or low interest. In that sense, social media may help to overcome the reinforcement effect. The only significant effect on voters' perceptions comes from the issue of whether voters frequently used the Internet as an information channel during the election campaign. When controlled for other relevant conditions, the high frequency users are most likely to consider social media as apt platforms for political communication. This is not a surprise in light of previous research that states that experience with the communication medium is a strong predictor for the perception of its richness (Carlsson & Zmud, 1999).

When it comes to the politicians, it is clear that social media use in the election campaign and an explicit focus on young voters increase the tendency to consider social media as political platforms of current interest. The last point, that is, focus on young voters, brings up the significance of the background variables because it 'speaks to' the result that young more than old voters tend to consider social media in the same way. Moreover, the analysis confirms the significance of age, although not only directly but also indirectly through the specific group variables, cf. the weaker but still significant effect in Model 3. The effect of age on voters' and politicians' perceptions implies a somewhat greater tendency of young people to judge social media as useful platforms for political communication.

Unlike previous research on the political use of social media, our analysis indicates that female voters and politicians are indeed more likely to assess social media as relevant arenas for political communication than are their male counterparts. This is the case even when controlling for other factors. There are two possible explanations for this gender discrepancy. It is a fact that in absolute numbers Norwegian women are bigger users of social media in general, including Facebook, than men, and women may therefore be more familiar with social media as an information and communication tool at the everyday level. It may therefore be assumed that women's experience with social media in everyday communication informs their view of social media as an apt arena for political communication. Furthermore, even if Norwegian women are not as visible as men in public debates due to lower active participation, this is not synonymous with being absent. Women's use of the media may be more passive as 'listeners' to the political debates on social media sites, giving them another frame of reference against which to assess the suitability of social media in a political context.

The results in Table 3 indicate that while household income has no significant effect on voters' perceptions, in the analysis of politicians' perceptions, income has a significant positive effect that gets even stronger when controlling for the politician-specific variables. High income would seem to correlate with a positive opinion of social media's potential role as a political arena. The nonsignificant but negative effect of income on voters is as expected, whereas the positive effect on politicians is somewhat surprising given the Norwegian context. However, it is not more surprising

Table 3: What explains the views on social media as political platforms? (unstandardized B-coefficient (OLS))[a]

	Index_voters			Index_politicians		
	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 3**	**Model 1**	**Model 2**	**Model 3**
Constant	5.060	4.569	4.698	3.799	3.302	2.840
Gender[b]	0.470**	0.559**	0.576**	0.527**	0.530**	0.494**
Age[c]	-0.024**	-0.013**	-0.011*	-0.035**	-0.030**	-0.015*
Education level[e,l]	-0.168	-0.335**	-0.331**	0.405**	0.345*	0.387**
Household income[f]	0.022	-0.001	-0.008	0.151*	0.135*	0.150**
ICT competence[d,l]		0.454**	0.411**		0.311*	0.236
Political interest[g]			-0.133			
Voted in the local 2011 election[h]			0.020			
Used the Internet often as an information channel during the local 2011 election campaign[i]			0.234**			
Used social media with a private profile in the local 2011 election campaign[j]						1.122**
A specific focus on young voters[k]						0.501**
Adjusted-R2	0.040	0.062	0.066	0.079	0.084	0.154

N_{voter} = 928 $N_{politician}$=710

**Significant at the 1% level

*Significant at the 5% level

[a] A control for multicollinearity shows that the independent variables are linearly independent (tolerance $>$ 0.20).

[b] 0=male, 1=female.

[c] Centralized continuous variable

[d] 0=very bad, 1=bad, 2=good, 3=very good

[e] 0=no education, 1=primary and secondary school, 2=upper secondary school, 3=college/university

[f] Six-scale variable, 0=0-199.999 NOK, 5=more than 1.000.000 NOK

[g] 0=no interest, 1=small interest, 2=some interest, 3=much interest

[h] 0=no, 1=yes

[i] 0=never, 1= seldom, 2=at least once a week, 3=every day

[j] 0=no, 1=yes

[k] 0=no, 1=yes

[l] The distribution on the variable is somewhat skewed: very few respondents (voters and politicians) actually have a low value.

that it can be explained by the fact that politicians strong in resources have better opportunities to use more channels – a kind of digital divide factor.

Regarding the two variables related to knowledge, highest education level and ICT competence, the analysis documents clear differences between voters and politicians. Education level has a significant effect on both groups, but it is opposite; politicians with high education levels consider social media a more relevant arena for political communication than their counterparts with fewer educational achievements. The opposite is the case for voters, where less well educated voters have a tendency to be slightly more positive. The discrepancy may be related to the conclusion in previous Norwegian research that social media do mobilize new voters in politics who often use social media only for political communication, while social media are often used as a supplement by politicians with plenty of resources but are rarely used by politicians with fewer resources.

Unlike education level, the effect of ICT competence is positive for voters and politicians; high ICT competence promotes a view of social media as apt arenas for political communication. However, the effect is significant only for voters when controlled for group-specific variables. This indicates that the effect for politicians is of a more indirect nature but still real. However, it may also indicate that, independent of technological skills, most politicians recognize the political communicative role of social media. This is especially the case for politicians focusing on young voters, using social media themselves or just because it is politically correct to do it in light of 'social forces, such as others' attitudes and symbolic cues (Treviño, Webster & Stein, 2000:164). The fact that education level and ICT competence have opposite effects explains why the negative effect of education becomes stronger (significant) when controlling for ICT competence (Model 2).

6.5 Conclusions: Social Media Venues as Institutions for Political Communication

This article has focused on social media and politicians' and voters' perceptions of it as an arena for local political communication. The reason for this focus is that society has experienced fundamental changes in how people communicate because of rapid developments in new technologies. The changes concern not only the practical use of communication technologies but norms, expectations and perceptions as well and thus institutional changes. In light of this and the widespread belief in the democratic political benefits of new communication technologies, the analysis has cast light on the extent to which social media is anchored as an institution for political communication between local politicians and voters. The technological frames model and the rational choice perspective within institutionalism have been used as reference points for the analysis. That is, the study gives credence to the argument that 'an

understanding of people's interpretations of a technology is critical to understanding their interaction with it' (Orlikowski & Gash, 1994, p. 175). Moreover, it is assumed that before social media can provide a significant platform for political communication between voters and politicians, both groups must see social media as an appropriate vehicle for such communication and expect it to function as such. In this sense, both groups of political actors support social media as an institution for political communication and therefore recognize shared norms, rules and understandings. That is to say, the institutional anchoring of social media as an arena for local political communication is proceeding. According to the rational choice perspective, the driving force may be the experience of usefulness.

In line with this, the main conclusion is that we have strong indications that the institutionalization of social media as a political arena is in progress. However, the question is how stable the institutionalization is. The analysis shows that many voters and politicians see social media in general as an appropriate platform for political communication and expect them to function as such, which seems to corroborate expectations of social media to constitute a shared arena for both voters and politicians. Furthermore, although in the overall picture voters' and politicians' perceptions of social media are not that dissimilar along a political/non-political dimension. Politicians are more likely than voters to recognize the role of social media as an apt platform for political communication. This difference may be related to different views on the power and richness of social media, as well as different views on 'usefulness' given the different roles of the two groups in a political context. Politicians act strategically according to their belief in the power of social media, while voters are more concerned about its practical aspects (Cohen, Tsfati & Sheafer, 2008). The study indicates that this is even the case for local politicians in small and medium-sized municipalities. Moreover, the fact that politicians – the stable supply side of political communication – are more interested in social media means that social media will be used in such a context. And the fact that a great portion of voters, especially the young, recognizes social media as an appropriate political channel indicates that there is an audience – a demand side – and that this audience may well get bigger in the future. All together, these findings call attention to a process of institutionalizing that is anchored in the central actors' perceptions of what is useful.

Nevertheless, even if many voters and politicians recognize the potential political communicative role of social media, it is not without provisos. The provisos are, for instance, related to a preference for more conventional arenas for political communication, such as newspapers and face-to-face meetings. It seems obvious to interpret this finding as a sign of a 'want all' mentality in contrast to an 'either/or' mentality. In terms of institutionalizing, this observation refers to institutional change through layering, which means a change that 'can set in motion path-altering dynamics through a mechanism of what we might think of as *differential growth*' (Streeck & Thelen, 2005, p. 23). The practical explanation for layering and differential growth may be that for many actors it is rational to prefer more than just one arena for political com-

munication, depending on the aim and scope of the communication relevant to the matter of context. They may not consider old and new media as mutually exclusive channels for information and communication but as complementary. The media may be complementary in the sense that they are used to reach different audiences or that they are used for different kinds of information and communication.

However, what is interesting in light of the discourse on the democratic potential of new media is that the analysis indicates that social media may function as arenas for overcoming some aspects of the reinforcement effect in the traditional political sphere, meaning that social media as an institution for political communication does not reinforce common democratic divides. Some groups of voters who are often not very visible in traditional offline political communication, such as women, young people and less well educated people, have a stronger tendency to perceive social media as a suitable arena for political communication. This finding is important in light of the representative democracy argument that social and demographic representation is related to the representation of different attitudes and interests (Skjeie, 2014:15). In this way, the maintenance of the institutionalizing of social media as political arenas has democratic legitimacy. Furthermore, in contrast with the research on new media use, the study shows that political interest has no effect on such perceptions (Kim, Wyatt & Katz, 1999). These findings are suggestive because they indicate that social media, unlike more conventional media institutions, may have the potential to become an institution for political mobilization among groups that traditionally are left out of or at least are less visible in political arenas. It is an optimistic conclusion that contrasts with much of the research but is nonetheless confirmed by data on the perceptions of social media from a frontrunner, Norway, in the diffusion and use of new technologies in general and of social media in particular in everyday communication. It appears that the institutional anchoring of social media as an arena for political communication may complement other institutions of political communication and in that way be a contribution rather than a replacement.

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