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# Local Election Blogs: Networking among the Political Elite

Senior Researcher **Signe Bock Segard** (corresponding author)  
Institute for Social Research, P.O. Box 3233 Elisenberg, NO-0208 Oslo, Norway  
Phone: +47 23 08 61 00  
Fax: +47 23 08 61 01  
[signe.b.segaard@socialresearch.no](mailto:signe.b.segaard@socialresearch.no)

Assistant Professor **Jeppe Agger Nielsen**  
*Department of Political Science, Fibigerstræde 1, DK-9220 Aalborg Ø, Denmark*  
[agger@dps.aau.dk](mailto:agger@dps.aau.dk)

## Abstract

This article explores the role of social media (essentially blogs) in the 2011 Norwegian local election campaigns. We commence by developing a framework for investigating political communication using the social media that conceptualises the horizontal and vertical conversation along two dimensions: participants and interaction. Next, we apply our framework in a case study of election blogs in twelve Norwegian municipalities using multiple data sources. In contrast to the democratic vision of social media, our analysis demonstrates that election blogs are primarily used by those who are politically active in other arenas as well and that most communication consists of one-way information dissemination with little actual exchange of information. The main findings also indicate a paradox: there is a mismatch between the types of communication the candidates perceive as important and their actual behaviour in the local election campaign. While candidates say they want to connect with the electorate, in practice they are networking with each other. Our findings are discussed in light of the institutional setting in which the blogging take place, and the specific social media under investigation.

## Keywords

Social media, election blogs, election campaign, local election, Norway

# 1. Introduction

The rapid expansion of social media and public use of social networks in everyday life held the promise of an imminent revitalization of democratic processes. Through social media citizens have an opportunity to interact with politicians and parties, and discuss issues or share opinions on a larger scale [29, 38]. An election campaign is one such democratic process in which the social media may constitute an important arena for public debate where the voice of the individual voter and candidate can be heard. The democratic deliberative visions of the social media are related to what is known as the *horizontal conversation* in creating meeting places where people can develop a communicative community through social networks in a virtual public sphere [11, 38]. However, given the contextual setting in question – the election campaign – and the traditional understanding of election campaigns as arenas of battle there are also expectations related to the use of social media in this context by candidates to convey political information and mobilize support. Candidates may use the new media to promote their own candidatures by communicating directly with the voters and hopefully boosting their sense of affiliation [20]. This can be termed a *vertical conversation*. Both kinds of communicative strategy – horizontal and vertical communication – are relevant in election campaigns from the perspective of the candidates wishing to win voters' favour and votes. But while the *horizontal conversation* is connected to the democratic visions of social media and the Habermasian idea of the role of rationality in deliberative democracy, the *vertical conversation* can be understood in light of a more traditional approach to the election campaign as a platform for competitive democracy. The article's central theme is therefore the deliberative visions of social media; the central question is whether the logic of the specific context – the election campaign – is visible in the way the communication actually flows.

While expectations are high, there is little empirical evidence of social media's success as a democratic arena in election campaigns, especially not at the local level (but see [13]). Our focus is therefore on the local election campaign. We ask whether social media can be used to improve local democracy in the context of local election campaigns. In what ways do voters and political candidates use the new technological platforms in these campaigns? Is digital debate something that interests the electorate in general, or only a small group of politically engaged persons? Is the local online campaign dominated by political elites and is the direction of communication from the top down? In seeking to answer these questions this paper analyses the use of a specific type of social medium – what we know at the time as the local election blogs – intended originally as a platform for local candidates to advance their election campaigns and dialogue with voters during the 2011 local elections. The blogs can be understood as a form of social network since each blog concerns an election campaign in a specific locality (municipality), and the fact that active participation presupposes membership, registration of a profile, and use of web 2.0 technologies. The election blogs are niche blogs; they fulfil a specific function for a specific period of time. Other forms of political communication, with lower entry thresholds for active participants, may be, and probably are, to be found in other corners of the social media such as Facebook and Twitter. We should therefore understand the conclusions of this study in the particular hallmarks of the election blog. The concluding part of the article discusses the scope of our investigation in greater detail.

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate how local election blogs are used in practice. We identify local candidates' and voters' use of blogs, and discuss how their communicative behaviour can be understood in a democratic perspective based on the two models of political democratic communication. The research question is: *In what manner are election blogs used as communicative arenas in the local election campaign, and how can local candidates'*

*communicative behaviour in this type of social media be understood in a democratic perspective?*

An assumption on which the question relies is the view that candidates' communicative behaviour in an election campaign can build on a set of different principles of democratic communication that may partly be related to the institutional framework – the political system – and partly to the specific communicative arena in the social media. At the same time, the candidates are assumed to use social media as a means of winning voters' sympathy and votes [18]. The question is how they do this – by way of horizontal or vertical modes of conversation?

### **1.1 Previous research**

Previous studies of online election campaigns have largely focused on the political parties or the leading candidates' use of social media in national or European parliamentary election campaigns (e.g. [7, 9, 14, 18, 19, 21, 23, 29, 34, 45, 46, 47]). There is reason, current research indicates, to adjust our expectations of the social media's democratic potential. In general, what previous research demonstrates is the professionalization and targeting of campaign communication at given target groups' specific needs and interests through individualized and personalized information dissemination. Moreover, the research shows, dialogue online is compromised in favour of one-way communication from the parties and top candidates: 'Web-based communication is largely a party-led, top-down phenomena and not a two-way dialog' [18, p. 9]. In an analysis of Finnish voters' behaviour in online discussion forums leading up to the 2007 general election, Strandberg concludes that 'public deliberation is generally not found on-line' [42, p. 85]. With regard to political participation, previous research gives little reason to expect an automatic manifestation of the unique democratic potential of the new media in terms of broad inclusion in political communication. We might expect political communication, primarily online, to take place between actors already

politically active, and the use of new media in the political space to reinforce rather than undermine existing political inequality between groups of citizens. [5, 8, 10, 22, 25, 26, 28, 39, 42, 43, 44].

While previous literature, then, has focused on professionalized, individualized, and personalized campaigns, one actor disappears from spotlight – *the local candidate*. This article focuses on the local candidate and local election campaign in Norway. The local election, by its very nature, appeals to voters precisely because it deals with welfare issues of importance to the individual voter such as education, care of the elderly, and childcare [2]. This is particularly true in Scandinavian where municipalities are responsible for the delivery of vital welfare services. Hence, local elections relate to peoples' everyday life and could therefore be expected to induce a broad range of people to get involved and discuss issues with candidates. At the same time, it is important to note that more than 90 per cent of the Norwegian population can access the internet from their home, and three in five participate in social media and networks [41]. These statistics place Norway in the elite of information societies internationally [6]. This level of normalization implies that the social media have become an integral part of everyday life of many people, not to mention commercial and public actors. Moreover, Norway is characterized by low population density and geographical inaccessibility, making social media a feasible, alternative, means of citizen involvement. One would therefore expect social media, and particularly election blogs as an arena for election campaigning, to have great appeal in this particular setting. In this sense, the Norwegian case may prove useful as a kind of 'exploratorium' in the use of web 2.0 technologies.

The following section presents our analytic framework and a description of the background to the study. After presenting the empirical data, an analysis of the local candidates' use of election blogs is undertaken. The final section discusses the main findings and the adequacy of our conceptual framework.

## 2. Two models of political communication

In order to highlight the candidates' actual use of social media in general, and election blogging more specifically, the article conceptualizes two models of political communication: the *horizontal conversation* and the *vertical conversation*. These are two communicative strategies by which candidates try to win voters' sympathy and votes. The strategies are based on different rationales, tools, and views of the actors – candidates and voters – involved in electioneering. – The two models are presented as competitive and set up against each other in an ideal perspective along two dimensions: Participants and Interaction. This is useful in the analysis since it assists in illustrating the extremes in the way candidates use social media as a communicative tool. However, it is necessary to keep in mind that theoretical models are simplifications and do not always capture every empirical nuance. The latter is an empirical question and is addressed in the discussion of the study's findings and the model's adequacy. We commence by taking a closer look at political communication as a horizontal form of conversation.

### 2.1 The horizontal conversation

There is a notion of network formation among equal players facing symmetric conditions of participation in the idea of the *horizontal conversation*. The symmetry between the participants implies they have 'the same rights, for example, to address issues, to comment, to take an initiative, and to control, meaning that they exhibit the same behavior' [27, p. 2]. As a consequence, networks are understood here as non-hierarchical structures consisting of interdependent participants who exchange resources in the form of opinions, views and knowledge, while the participants are independent by virtue of the network's character as an *open access* arrangement [33]. The network concept assumes that participants can come and go and will participate because they have an interest in doing so and intend to contribute to

the exchange of opinions in interaction with other participants. Extensive mutual exchange of opinions and information enables participants to focus on topics of relevance to a wider public. In this context, social media may be regarded as a public sphere in which information and attitudes are exchanged, where social media act as meeting places for people who, via forms of social networking, develop a symmetrical communicative community online. This notion of technology's democratic potential echoes Habermas' idea of the public sphere as an arena for public discourse. The arguments count for more than the participants' status and the process is characterized by a rational critical approach – deliberation based on a nuanced approach [3, 4, 12, 29]. This refers also to the idea of the 'active citizenship' [1, pp. 45-46] as well as to a structural framework enabling the horizontal conversation to take place.

Within the framework of local election campaigns, the horizontal conversation model would lead us to expect a candidate who resorts to the horizontal conversation strategy in an attempt to win voters' favour to place emphasis on symmetrical communication flows and mutual exchange of views. This requires an interactive process where all parties can initiate, ask and answer on the same footing. Moreover, local candidates would be expected to communicate with people who share the same political interests through the social media, and that room for nuance is created through interactive communication.

## **2.2 The vertical conversation**

The vertical conversation, as a model of political communication, ties in with a competitive and elitist democratic perspective on political processes. It focuses in particular on the output side of democracy, and democratic legitimacy is considered to depend on the outcome rather than the input process [1, p. 42]. In other words, interactive communicative behaviour between elected representatives and those who vote is not prioritized [16, p. 55]. In an election campaign, the candidates address the role of political leadership that actively initiates, designs, and offers political products to voters who get to choose from these

different products [15, 30, p. 5, 36]. Thus political communication as a vertical conversation involves complementary participants ‘where the parties exhibit different kinds of behaviour: one offering – the other receiving’ [31, p. 31]. The vertical communication model emphasizes what political communication is about: the elected representatives’ opportunity to communicate and ‘market’ their politics, visions and programmes. Social media are therefore considered first and foremost as a conduit for vertical flows of information from the political level to the voters [1, p. 44; 37, p. 39]. Political candidates want to use social media to disseminate information to the *masses*, and in a manner consistent with the simplicity and clarity of marketing logic. They want to increase voters’ sense of affiliation and thus their propensity to vote for them and/or party colleagues at the election.

Based on the vertical conversation model we would expect the political candidates to dominate the election campaign in the social media with their dissemination of information, and the conversation to be restricted to the candidates’ short and ‘politicized’ answers to questions from ‘the others’. It is the candidate who gives, the voters who receive.

Furthermore, one would expect participants with different levels of political interest to use social media as they do other media, to seek easily understood, concise information related to the local election campaign. Political candidates will take advantage of this search for information to promote their political message. The relationship between candidates and voters will therefore be complementary. Communication will have a vertical structure in which the behaviour of the participants is influenced by different intentions and level of political activity and interest.

Table 1 summarizes the two models of political communication using key characteristics and expectations for the empirical analysis. The expectations are formulated as opposing statements so that the results of the analysis will strengthen one of the models and weaken the other.

[TABLE 1 HERE]

The two models are operationalized in the next section, which also describes the empirical background and sources of data.

### **3. Empirical background, sources of data and operationalization**

#### **3.1 Empirical background**

The study relies on data on the 2011 Norwegian local government election campaign. Set against the backdrop of the terrorist attacks against government buildings in the city centre and members of the Labour Party youth organization on the island of Utøya, 22 July 2011, the election campaign took place in a nation in grief and a nationwide mobilization in support of democracy, transparency and political participation. In light of the special situation, the political parties agreed not to start campaigning before Saturday, August 13. This study of election blogs is therefore limited to the period commencing 13 August and ending 11 September, the day before Election Day.

The election blogs studied here concern local elections in twelve municipalities, but have the same institutional and editorial connection to a regional newspaper – the daily *Firda* in Sogn and Fjordane County. *Firda* gave local candidates in all municipalities the same opportunity to use social media as a communicative tool in their campaigns. One reason for focusing on election blogs with an institutional connection to a local newspaper is that newspapers in

general have proven to be among the most important means of communication and information to candidates as well as to voters in Norwegian local election campaigns [13, 17].

The choice of *Firda* is justified by *Firda*'s distinguished record in previous elections as an important medium for voters and local candidates, and because the newspaper had done a great deal to encourage local candidates and voters to participate online during the 2011 campaign. The newspaper created a campaign portal ([www.Firda.no/val2011](http://www.Firda.no/val2011)), subdivided into 'zones' according to the twelve municipalities covered by the newspaper. A 'political election blog' was established in each zone and all candidates and electors in that area were encouraged to make use of it. *Firda* also offered to train local politicians in blogging techniques prior to the elections and the editor hosted meetings for most of the involved political parties. The blogs were constituted within the framework of a net society (Origo); people were required to register with full name, personal identity number (11 digits) and a mobile phone number in order to write a blog post or add a comment/image. After having checked these details against the population register, a password was sent to the mobile phone number. *Firda* reserved the right to use all blog posts/images that were submitted to the election campaign portal.<sup>1</sup>

Consequently, our study reports the results of an investigation into local candidates' behaviour in twelve social networks linked to the election campaign in the same number of municipalities within the same county. The networks have the same institutional setting and follow the same setup and rules on blog participation.

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<sup>1</sup> Based on this right, *Firda* gave the research team editorial access and permission to use the blogs for research purposes. The research project was approved by the Norwegian Data Protection Official for Research (NSD) as fulfilling the requirements of the Personal Data Act, and current regulations. In practice, it means that potential blog participants were not explicitly informed about the research project on the condition that anonymity of all participants would be maintained when the research results were published. And given that the newspaper *Firda* had created the election blogs independently of the research project, potential participants were not affected by the project

### 3.2 Data sources

We made use in our study of three sets of empirical data. The first set contains quantitative registration data on observable aspects of the election blogs. In accordance with our framework, the data are used to illustrate two dimensions of election blogs as a conversation arena, namely *Participants* and *Interaction*. Registration is made on the basis of a systematic reading of all postings (N=229) to all twelve election blogs. The recorded data include municipality, subject, gender and ranking on party list, number of comments, number of comments signed by male/ female/politician/candidate for different parties/. The registration data were controlled by two researchers to ensure reliability.

A second data set is based on the web analytics solution of *Google Analytics*, which provides log file information on website traffic. In using Google Analytics, information not directly observable on the election blogs can be obtained through various types of visitor statistics, e.g. number of visits, and unique/new/repeat visitors.<sup>2</sup> The log file data are used to shed light on *the extent* of campaign blogging in terms of the popularity of the blogs and loyalty of the participants

The third dataset is based on a quantitative survey of local political candidates to obtain information about their opinions concerning the use of social media for political ends. A web-based questionnaire was sent to *every* local political candidate in the county of Sogn and Fjordane with a 'public' email address (70 per cent of all candidates<sup>3</sup>). In total, 780 local candidates answered the survey (response rate 40 per cent). These data are used to determine the opinions of local political candidates regarding the usefulness and appropriateness of social media as an instrument of political electioneering and which communicative activities they consider to be the most important in local election campaigns. As is apparent in our

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<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, we only have data on seven election blogs due to problems with Google Analytics.

<sup>3</sup> The web survey was sent to the candidates 14 days after the election. The response deadline was the first week of November.

analysis, there is a discrepancy between their views and how their use the social media in practice.

### **3.3 Operationalization of the models of political communication**

The horizontal conversation model is related to participative ideas of democracy which emphasize democracy as an open network between equal participants. According to this model of conversation, social media are expected to function as public arenas in which the exchange of opinions among candidates and voters constitutes a crucial activity. The vertical conversation model highlights the vertical structures between the participants and emphasizes the need of political elites to communicate their politics to the electorate. In this model, political candidates are expected to use social media as strategic tools, with the aim of reaching as many voters as possible.

In accordance with the description of the two models (Table 1), the analysis of content of the election blogs was conducted along the same two dimensions: *Participants* and *Interaction* (Table 2).

*Participants* refers to characteristics of the participants of the debates, i.e. the poster and the commentators. A crucial distinction goes between local politicians and non-politicians, and between the local candidates at the top of the party list, and those lower down. We focus here on the participant's political background to shed light on whether they comprise a homogeneous group when it comes to political activity and interest.

*Interaction* refers to the blog's character in terms of responsiveness, meaning that the interaction dimension highlights the extent to which a blog post evokes one or more comments. We talk about unilateral dissemination versus mutual exchange of opinions and information. Interaction occurs when someone becomes engaged by the initiating phase of the conversation – the post – which sets the premises for the ensuing conversation. Interaction is

therefore to be seen in connection to the space given to arguments as an indicator of engagement (Robertson et al. 2010). The question is whether the scope of the posts provides room for any nuances.

[TABLE 2 HERE]

#### **4. Analysis. The local election campaign as it transpired in the election blogs**

Nowadays, the internet is a ‘site of action’, an open and inclusive arena, rather than just a ‘site of information’. This is what the great democratic vision of social media is about. Social media are regarded as public arenas that form the framework for the democratic conversation among equal actors in a political process. We know what the visions are, the question is whether these conceptions reflect the reality. We ask how we should understand local candidates’ use of election blogs in terms of our two dimensions of political communication, *Participants* and *Interaction*.

We commence by looking at local candidates’ views of social media in general as a campaign arena, the popularity of election blogs and the loyalty of its participants.

[FIGURE 1 HERE]

Figure 1 shows whether local candidates in general consider visibility in local media as more important than visibility in social media. According to the political candidates in this survey, talking and discussing issues with voters is significantly more important than doing the same with political colleagues in other parties. These findings are not surprising, but as the analysis

shows, communication via election blogs – paradoxically – is mostly characterized by discussions between political colleagues. As seen in the figure, leading candidates are more likely to show this pattern, than candidates further down the party list. While this is the candidates’ view of the opportunities afforded by social media, actual use is another side of the story. We now turn to those who participate in the election blogs.

#### **4.1 Participants – the usual suspects?**

Before looking at the specific characteristics of the participants, we take a closer look at the participants’ loyalty to the election blogs and the popularity of the blogs (Table 3).

[TABLE 3 HERE]

The most remarkable observations to be drawn from Table 3 are the relatively small number of zone members; the large number of new visits and the small number of repeat visitors to the zones. The fact that active blog participation presumes membership refers to what we denote as *high threshold participation*. An average of 43 members (including the administrative hosts) does not seem very high and is probably no more than one would expect at a moderately sized election rally offline. But social media also allow passive participation, low threshold participation requiring nothing more than ‘visiting’ the blogs. On average, the blogs had 494 unique visitors, generating 1,168 visits to each zone. This is equivalent to 2.36 visits by every zone visitor. Table 3 shows that the repeat visitor average (63) only accounts for 13 per cent of the number of unique visiting participants. When one-time visitors are removed, the repeat visitor is shown to have visited their zone an average of 11.7 times – a small group of followers. It also means that as much as 87 per cent of the people visiting a zone did not return to the zone on a later occasion. This is consistent with ‘the 90-9-1 rule’ devised by previous research, which shows that 90 per cent of social network users are

‘lurkers’ who read or observe without actively contributing [24]. According to our analysis, election blogs are not particularly popular, and participants’ loyalty is generally relatively limited. The finding conforms with Robertson et al.’s study of the use of Facebook in the 2008 US presidential election. They found a minority of ‘participants returning to participate more than once’ [34, p. 27]; moreover, this group was ‘engaged in what Dahlberg calls “a commitment to an on-going dialogue”’ [34, p. 29].

When we look for differences between the participants, the main one is between candidates and voters. Our analysis shows that all the politicians who signed a post and/or submitted a comment also ran for election in the local elections. As Table 4 shows, it is predominantly local politicians who have signed posts as well, and, to a lesser degree, comments in the election blogs. Inasmuch as the group of non-politicians is largely comprised of politically active representatives of local and regional civil society (NGOs), the variation along the participant dimension is limited.

[TABLE 4 HERE]

As can also be seen in Table 4, the leading (mayoral) candidates are the most active.<sup>4</sup> A significance analysis confirms this significantly higher tendency of the leading candidates to write a post, compared with candidates placed further down the party lists. Similarly, the analysis shows that men are generally much more likely to write posts and comments. This male dominance is apparent and particularly high among submitters of comments, of which 81 per cent are signed by a male. So despite a certain female presence in the first phase of the conversation (initiative), women are less active in the follow up phase. Thirty-two per cent of all posts are signed by a woman, as against 19 per cent of the comments. Male dominance is

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<sup>4</sup> It is possible to identify their ranking on the party list for all posts by politicians except for two (N = 201).

also higher when the posts are signed by non-politicians. This male predominance among the candidates is partly explained by the fact that the majority of candidates in Norwegian local elections are male. On a national basis, 58 per cent of all candidates were men, and in Sogn and Fjordane County the proportion was 56 per cent [40]. But that the proportion of males among non-politicians should be higher is somewhat surprising in the light of the fact that Norwegian women have the same or higher levels of political interest and probability of participating in a local election [32]. The explanation for male dominance must therefore be related to something other than political interest and participation. One possible explanation is that Norwegian ‘[w]omen feel less informed than men and less qualified to participate in local politics’ [35, p. 249]. The relatively poor participation of women on election blogs can thus be related to a ‘gap in self-perceived local political competence’ between women and men [35, p. 249].

The study of blog participants indicates that the election blogs are not only a venue for the already politically active, but also an arena for men and what can be considered the local political elite, particularly regarding conversation initiation and setting the framework for conversations by posting on blogs. Almost 90 per cent of the posts are written by a local candidate, and more than 60 per cent by a mayoral candidate. It is quite evident that the election blogs mobilize participants who resemble each other in terms of local political interest and activity. In general, the participants analysis points to a symmetrical relationship between participants, supporting the validity of the horizontal conversation model in understanding the election blogs.

#### **4.2 Interaction – networking among the political elite?**

Election campaigns are about communication between people standing for election and people who vote. The overall objective is that voters should be sufficiently informed to make

a ‘reasoned’ choice such that a candidate wins the sympathy and vote of the voter. Table 5 distinguishes between posts signed by politicians and those signed by non-politicians

[TABLE 5 HERE]

Although data based on a few posts signed by non-politicians (26) should be interpreted with caution, the message of Table 5 can be summarized by stating that there is no clear connection between entry length and whether the signer of the post is a politician or not. However, it is a fact that the longest posts are signed by politicians and several of the shortest posts by non-politicians. Moreover, leading candidates seem to write longer posts than candidates in general. The fact that leading candidates are engaged, as the participant analysis showed, and write longer posts, is interesting because it indicates that committed writers (leading candidates) are not more likely to resort to the logic of marketing by submitting short posts, leaving no room for detail or nuance. When it comes to assessing length, the question is what is defined as a short and a long post. Our main impression is that, on average, the posts are relatively long compared to what previous research on social media defines as long/short (e.g. [34]). Much can be said in 24–26 lines, which is equivalent to a speech of 2–3 minutes’ duration. Many questions can be raised and much information can be communicated. Based on the data, posts on election blogs in general are not particularly suitable for eye-catching sales posters and short slogans. Judging by the length of the posts, detailed information seems to be the main purpose, while leaving room for nuance and arguments. A large number of the posts are about the parties’ programmes, representatives, political issues, and promotion of party stands, or an event organized by the party. Not only the length of the post, but also different devices as images and links can prompt a reader’s interest engagement and stimulate interaction. Our analysis shows that only 3 per cent of all posts have links – and in that way

interact with the outer world [34]; 14 per cent have images. There is no significant difference between posts by politicians and non-politicians.

There is a total of 229 posts and 297 comments in our data, something which sometimes obscures the fact that 70 per cent of the posts do *not* evoke a response. In other words, most of the participation in election blogs consists of a uni-directional dissemination of information, not an exchange of information. Moreover, 87 per cent of those unanswered conversations are initiated by political candidates. In other words, the candidates' use of election blogs is mostly of the information poster type, pointing to a vertical form of conversation. Of the 30 per cent of the posts with at least one comment, more than 75 per cent of the comments are signed by a politician, 45 per cent by a non-politician. This corresponds to 23 and 14 per cent of all posts respectively. For posts signed by politicians the highest number of comments is 30, but just 6 comments for posts signed by non-politicians.

As seen in Figure 2, if we distinguish between posts signed by politicians and non-politicians, the former are much more likely to evoke a response. This applies to comments signed by political and non-politician alike.

[FIGURE 2 HERE]

The analysis further shows that every post by a politician with at least one comment generates an average of 3.34 comments by politicians and 1.06 comments by non-politicians. This supports what has already been contended about interaction: there is a strong tendency for political candidates involved in communicative interaction to interact mainly with each other. Political candidates are more likely to talk to each other; less likely to voters. It is in this context that opinions are exchanged – if any exchange occurs at all. This finding suggests a horizontal conversation model, in which the candidates converse with each other. On the other

hand, the propensity of commentators to be ‘attracted’ to those they consider like-minded, than to people who are different, does not apply to non-politicians. Also, non-politicians are more likely to respond to posts signed by politicians than posts signed by non-politicians. Given the purposes of the election campaign, non-politicians (voters), it can be said, act as expected.

## **5. Concluding discussion. Findings and the adequacy of the models**

Based on the conceptualization of the framework for political communication, the purpose of this article has been to examine the use of a specific social media – election blogs – as a communicative arena for local electioneering. In the following we briefly summarize the main results, before discussing the study’s contributions to knowledge and adequacy of the analytical models, including the limitations of our study.

### **5.1 Main findings**

As our analysis of the actual use of the election blogs demonstrates, they are primarily used by individuals who are already politically active. More specifically, election blogs, we find, are not only a venue for the already politically active, but also mainly an arena for men and what can be considered as the local political elite inasmuch as the most visible candidates on the blogs are also the leading ones in their communities. When political candidates participate in communicative interaction, they do so largely, we see, with each other. Election blogs, then, mobilize active participants who largely resemble each other in local political interests and activity, and blogs thus tend to support symmetrical conditions of participation. Another result is that active blogging consists mainly of information dissemination: political candidates use election blogs like others use information posters, rather than as a place to debate issues through interactive communication processes. Consequently, we conclude, most

of what is practiced in the election blogs fits largely with a vertical model of democratic communication rather than a horizontal one. Nevertheless, the study also shows that blogging provides a richer information space than traditional verbal electioneering. Even passive participants – people who are just browsing – learn things that may be useful in determining who to vote for. All the same, the main findings indicate a paradox in the mismatch between the candidates' behaviour in social media – local election blogs – and the type of communication they say is important in the local election campaign. The most important thing, the candidates say, is to talk and discuss issues with the voters, but they are in fact talking with each other.

And although it is the leading candidates who consider social media as a generally less important platform in the local election campaign, it is those candidates rather than ones ranked below them on the lists who are most visible in the election blogs. Finally, the study shows that participants' loyalty towards election blogs is limited, and restricted to a small group of followers. This must be viewed in light of the competitive situation in which such blogs are to be found. Election blogs are niche blogs. They are created with a specific and limited purpose in a defined physical space, yet compete with other social media for the attention and participation of the target groups. It may be asked whether it is useful to examine this type of social media with the same expectations and assumptions that are brought to bear in the study of other more widely used social media, whose entry thresholds are possibly lower, as well. It is about being realistic and understanding the survey in its empirical context. The next section discusses this aspect of the study in greater detail.

## **5.2 The adequacy of the models and contribution to knowledge**

When conceptualizing political communication as vertical and horizontal forms of conversation and along two dimensions – participation, and interaction – it requires of us an understanding of what political conversation entails in all its complexity. This is a major

strength because it entails recognition that reality is rarely black and white. However, it also implies an analytical complexity which makes it difficult to conclude whether a particular use of the social media supports or encourages a vertical or a horizontal form of conversation. That strength, we believe, outweighs the interest of a one-dimensional understanding. Our study shows that the candidates' use of election blogs largely coincides with a vertical understanding of political communication inasmuch as communication flows in one – direction only, and the purpose of the majority of the posts appears to be to disseminate information. This is just one aspect of the story. These information posters do not have capital letters and red fonts; and they leave room for detailed presentations and information. In this way they differ significantly from the marketing logic of the vertical conversation whose purpose is to maximise votes for the candidate and party in question by reinforcing voters' sense of affiliation. This point is important from a democratic perspective because it indicates that even passive participants can acquire sufficient information to make a reasoned choice. Good information is the foundation of democracy.

The vertical conversation model appears to capture some aspects of the election blogs, while the horizontal model captures others. It illustrates how much more complex is the use of election blogs and social media more generally than can be accounted for by one analytical model alone. In other words, the models of political communication are analytical tools which separately may prove empirically inadequate, but together may improve our understanding of the political use of social media. What is actually conveyed via the election blogs actually say amounts in practice to a hybrid of the two models of communication, in which the deliberative visions of social media blend with the conventional understanding of the empirical context – the election campaign – as a platform for competitive democracy. An important factor here is that both the vertical and the horizontal conversation in a democratic perspective can carry out important functions, namely to satisfy the voters and candidates'

different needs and wishes. Some candidates may wish to individualise and perhaps personalise their campaign, target different messages to different voter groups and individuals, and perhaps encourage deliberation on specific topics; others may wish to limit their communicative activity to the dissemination of more or less identical generalized political information to all voters. Voters are also likely to have different needs and desires: some will be attentive to rational argumentation while others will be more attracted to information which appeals to their feelings and sense of (political) affiliation. Social media can be used in election campaigns in different ways, then, dependent upon who the users are as well as the specific empirical setting.

The empirical setting is important to keep in mind when the final conclusion is drawn in this study. First of all, we have only studied a tiny corner of the social media in one national context at one particular time. Importantly, the institutional context for the chosen election blogs entails a variety of entry criteria, such as registering full name, personal identity number. It also gave *Firda* a legal right to the written word. These are high participation thresholds, and may go some way to explaining some of the empirical findings. The election blogs are arenas for the few and politically active who express themselves in many words and appeal mostly to 'like-minded' individuals. In many ways, this study demonstrates the opposite of what Habermas fears: a situation in which the public conversation is modified to encourage wider participation, but at the expense of qualitative content and in favour of a marketing logic [3, p. 26; 29, p. 233]. The fear is that marketing logic will promote a political communication characterized by simplicity rather than richness, and a focus on the more quantitative participation-oriented aspect of the democratic conversation in terms of reaching out to the many [3]. This fear, however, has no empirical support in our study of the use of election blogs in a local campaign which is largely explained by the institutional framework

within which blogs were selected. This conclusion has two implications: one for research and one for practical empirical approaches.

The research implication is a reminder of how important it is to recall the context in which the use of social media is understood. What we have found is that participation is fenced in by high entry thresholds. If the thresholds had been lower or absent our conclusions would probably have been different; there may not have been any mismatch between what candidates say is the important type of communication and the type of communication in which they participate in the social media. But it is also possible that low entry thresholds would repel the candidates and attract a segment of voters whose manner of speech the candidates feel is inappropriate in an election campaign. From this follows the practical empirical implication: it is largely possible to ‘steer’ the political conversation in social media by using the institutional setting which regulates the entry barriers. Entry thresholds may affect the political conversation in relation to participant circles and type of interaction.

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**Table 1. Two models for political communication. Central characteristics of horizontal and vertical conversation and expectations to the empirical analysis.**

<b>Political communication model</b>	<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>Expectations</b>
<b>Horizontal conversation</b>	<b>Symmetrical relationship</b>	<b>Political candidates and ‘other participants’ exhibit the <i>same</i> communicative behaviour</b>
- <b>Participants</b>	Similar participants regarding political activity	Initially all participants are politically active
- <b>Interaction</b>	Mutual exchange of opinion and nuances	Political candidates are a part of interactive communication with other participants and give room for nuances.
<b>Vertical conversation</b>	<b>Complementary relationship</b>	<b>Political candidates and ‘other participants’ exhibit <i>different</i> communicative behaviour</b>
- <b>Participants</b>	Participants are different regarding political activity	All participants are initially not as politically active
- <b>Interaction</b>	Dissemination of information and marketing logic – simplicity and shortness	Political candidates use social media to inform and sell their political message in a brief manner

**Table 2. Operationalization of horizontal and vertical conversation along three dimensions and measurable indicators.**

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Horizontal conversation</b>	<b>Vertical conversation</b>	<b>Indicators</b>
<b>Participants</b>	Equality	Inequality	Number of posts submitted by politicians versus non-politicians Number of comments submitted by politicians versus non-politicians
<b>Interaction</b>	Exchange of opinion	Dissemination of information	Number of comments per post Number of comments by politicians per post Number of comments by non-politicians per post Length of posts (number of lines)

**Table 3. Key statistics relating to election blogs: their popularity and loyalty of the participants (13. August – 11. September 2011).**

	<b>Zone-member**</b>	<b>Unique visitors*</b>	<b>New visitors (only one visit on the webpage)*</b>	<b>Total number of visits*</b>	<b>Repeat visitors*</b>
<b>Average</b>	43	494	431	1168	63
<b>Maximum</b>	72	867	781	3013	144
<b>Minimum</b>	27	204	169	347	26

*\*Based on Google Analytics-data for the seven zones.*

*\*\*As of 11. September 2011*

**Table 4 Characteristics of participants who have signed posts and comments. In per cent**

	<b>Post</b>	<b>Comment</b>
<b>Non-politician</b>	11%	24%
• Male	73%	
• Female	27%	
<b>Politician</b>	89%	76%
• Mayoral candidate	62%	
• Place 2-5 on party list	27%	
• Place 6+ on party list	11%	
• Male	67%	
• Female	33%	
<b>Male</b>	68%	81%
<b>Female</b>	32%	19%
<i>N</i>	229	297

**Table 5 Percentage of posts of given length signed by politicians and non-politicians**

	<b>Posts by politicians</b>	<b>Posts by non-politicians</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>0-4 lines**</b>	4% (2%)*	12%	5%
<b>5-20 lines</b>	38% (37%)*	15%	36%
<b>21-50 lines</b>	50% (54%)*	73%	53%
<b>More than 50 lines</b>	7% (7%)*	0%	6%
<b>Total</b>	<i>100%</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>100%</i>
<b>Average length</b>	<i>26.0</i>	<i>24.3</i>	<i>25.8</i>
<b>N</b>	<i>203 (125)*</i>	<i>26</i>	<i>229</i>

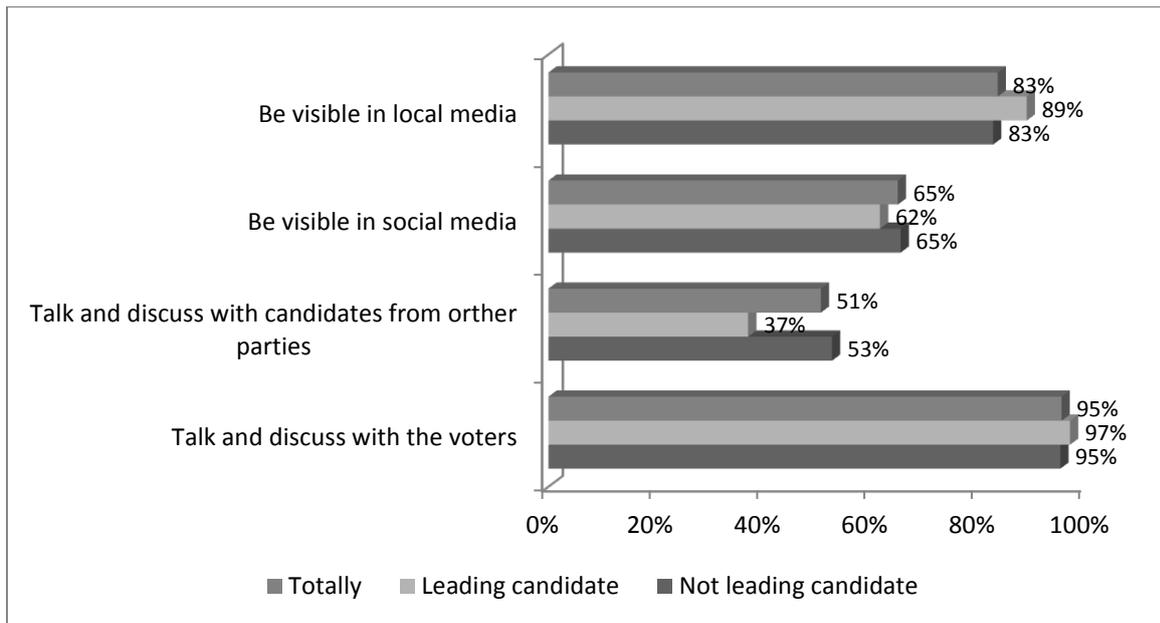
\*Leading candidates

\*\* The fact that some posts appear to have no lines is because they only consist of a video.

**Fig. 1. Percentage of local candidates who consider a given campaign activity as fairly or very important**

**Fig. 2. Percentage of different types of posts with at least one comment signed by non-politicians and politicians**

**Fig. 1. Percentage of local candidates who consider a given campaign activity as fairly or very important**



N minimum: 725 (total), 98 (leading candidate), 628 (not leading candidate).

Source: Survey among local candidates in Sogn and Fjordane County 2011.

**Fig. 2 Percentage of different types of posts with at least one comment signed by non-politicians and politicians**

