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## **Political Discourses on Twitter: Networking Topics, Objects and People**

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On August 2, 2011, the deputy governor of the Austrian province Carinthia, Uwe Scheuch, was sentenced to six months imprisonment for corruption. The court was convinced that he had offered Austrian citizenship to a Russian investor in exchange for a party donation. The conviction was the top news story in the Austrian media for days and triggered strong reactions from Scheuch's opponents and supporters, the latter claiming he was innocent and victim of a political conspiracy. Outside the mass media, the conviction was also heavily debated on Twitter. Twitter users discussed the impact of the event on Austria's political system and culture, commented on the story's development, got upset about the reactions of politicians, and cracked jokes about Scheuch's upcoming imprisonment. They linked to news stories, documents, critical blog posts, and satirical videos. They also heavily referred to each other, retweeted one another's messages, responded to arguments and approached each other for a reaction. On Twitter, Scheuch's conviction was not just a news story, but a public conversation engaging hundreds of politically interested Austrians.

The opportunities and challenges of the Internet for citizens to access and participate in political discourses are major strands of discussion within the academic debate on the nature of contemporary democracy (see Farrell, 2012, for a review). The open, transparent and low-threshold exchange of information and ideas Twitter allows shows great promise for a reconfiguration of the structure of political discourses towards a broadening of public debate by facilitating social connectivity. Based on extensive empirical research into practices and patterns of political tweeting in Austria, we will describe those discourses from three perspectives: (1) networking topics in terms of the inclusion of information, interpretation, and views into a debate; (2) networking media objects, driven by hyperlinking practices and resulting in a reconfiguration of web spheres; and (3) networking actors, driven by @mentioning practices, resulting in new patterns of interaction between political actors and citizens that reshape the participation structure of the public sphere. Connecting those perspectives can be fruitful to understand the processes of the creation and negotiation of political meaning through Twitter, and the way Twitter usage may shape citizens' approaches to political information and participation.

## **Networking Topics—Social Reality Testing the News**

Twitter is an awareness system that allows for an immediate, fast, and widespread dissemination of information (e.g., Kwak, Lee, Park, & Moon, 2010). The platform offers diverse means to share news from various sources, resulting in a stream of information, opinions, and emotions (Papacharissi & Oliveira, 2012) that presents a multi-faceted experience of ambient news (Hermida, 2010). Within political discourses, various political actors as well as individuals use Twitter to spread information on political events and to state their opinions (Small, 2011). The Twitter stream potentially provides multiple viewpoints on political debates (Yardi & boyd, 2010) and holds unique opportunities to structure those debates by the use of common hashtags (Bruns, 2012). Hashtag-driven political discourses are largely connected to events reported by mass media, at least in terms of topics taken up and quantity of messages sent (Bruns & Burgess, 2011; Larsson & Moe, 2011). Despite this connection, the Twitter agenda is likely to differ from the media agenda, because “events and themes are filtered through the community’s own established interests and news frames, resulting in a distribution of attention that is different from that of the mainstream media or of general public debate” (Bruns & Burgess, 2011, p. 13).

This holds true for political tweeting in Austria. In a study conducted on the tweets of the 374 most active users in discussions on Austrian domestic politics, Ausserhofer and Maireder (forthcoming), found that the mass media and Twitter agendas considerably differed in terms of attention given to certain topics. While long lasting and complex issues like the financial crisis or the wage negotiations of the metal industry were subject of detailed media reporting, hardly anyone mentioned those topics on Twitter. At the same time, the multi-national treaty for intellectual property rights ACTA was heavily debated by the tech-savvy Twitter community, but almost ignored by news media for a long time. Short-lived and eventful topics like the heavy protests against a prom of Vienna’s right-wing fraternities or political scandals were reported both by news media and on Twitter. On Twitter, however, political news were not only reported on but also interpreted and actively connected to other topics by the users at the same time. This contrasts the traditional Two-Step-Flow of Communication model (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955), which has been used to describe the interrelation of interpersonal and mass communication by researchers for decades. While perceiving the news from the mass media and discussing it within the personal social network are somewhat separated activities in this model, they are not on Twitter. The two steps of the communication flow dissolve as reports by news media and interpretation by the personal social networks become part of the same news stream and any single message may include both information and commentary on an event.

Following up on these findings, Maireder (2012) focused on Twitter discourses connected to three outstanding political events in Austria and showed that Twitter users extensively share political views and interpretations, besides the news itself. The three case studies were (a) the conviction of Uwe Scheuch for corruption introduced earlier, (b) the proposal of Austria’s minister of education Karl-Heinz Töchterle to reintroduce university tuition fees, and (c) the announcement of the assignment of a former official of the Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ), Niko Pelinka, to a high-level post at Austria’s public-service television station ORF. All of these cases were widely covered by the news media as well as discussed

on Twitter. In a content analysis of news reports from Austrian Press Agency's comprehensive database (na = 188, nb = 293, nc = 394) and tweets connected to the event collected by combined keyword queries (na = 1492, nb = 612, nc = 1955), the stories' development in terms of topics addressed was examined, comparing news media and the Twitter discourses. Each news items and tweet was assigned to one or more aspects of the story it was about. Each case had its own categories, of course, but the categories were consolidated into three types: Information on the actual political development (reports on the initial events or statements by actors involved, for example), context, meaning information related to other incidents connected to the story (political events in the past or current events), and general commentary.

Figure 1 illustrates the frequency of these types of Twitter activity on the three cases: In the Scheuch and Pelinka cases people tweeted a lot of general commentary from the beginning, while in the Pelinka case general commentary was the major type of content throughout the time. Some peaks in the discussion can be traced to specific events in the stories' developments, an interview broadcast or a parliamentary speech, for example. The figure also shows that from the minute the news on Uwe Scheuch's conviction, Niko Pelinka's appointment at the ORF, and Karl-Heinz Töchterle's push for tuition fees broke, Twitter users began interpreting the events. While the majority of tweets in the first hour after the initial event included short information reporting the incident itself, most of the tweets were not informational only. Users reported Scheuch's conviction by shortly stating he had been sentenced to six months imprisonment, but often accompanied this information with a short emotional or interpretative personal remark, signified by expressions like "Yeah!," "It was about time," or an emoticon. The tweets announcing Niko Pelinka's promotion largely included expressions of disbelief or anger, and those on the minister of education's statement mostly expressed either support for his proposal or opposition to it.

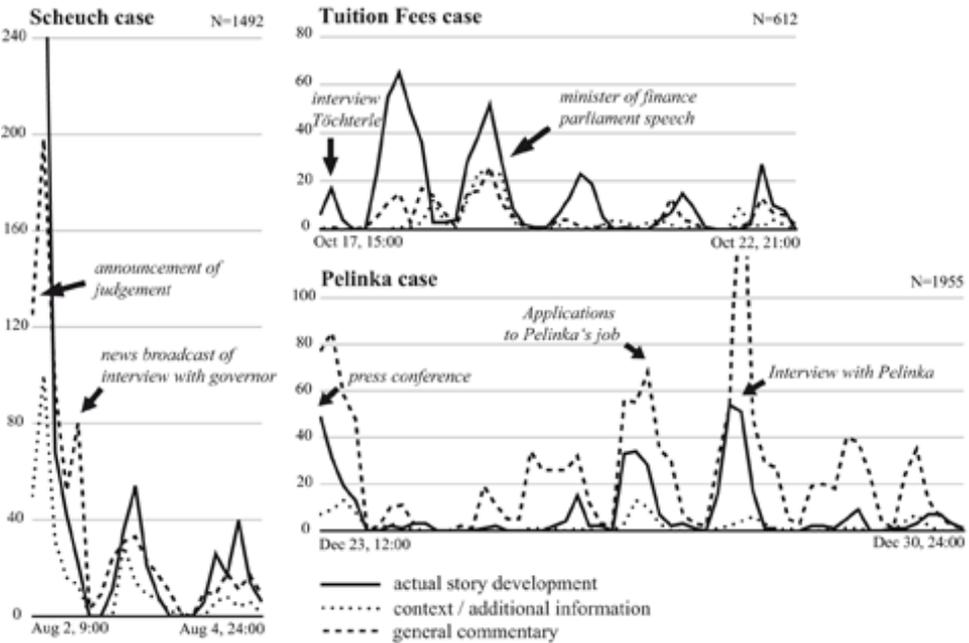


Figure 1: Number of tweets posted in the different categories of story aspects during the three hours following the event

In the hours and days after each of the initial events, the news media continuously reported on new developments within the political arena. All major online news sites had articles on the discussion of Scheuch's case by law experts and politicians, on the reactions to the tuition fee proposal by parties, universities, and the student union, as well as on the official statements by the journalists' union and others on the controversial appointment in the ORF. Alongside some background information on the central actors and political history, the news media concentrated on reporting the actual events that took place in the arena of professional political actors to a large extent.

After the initial spreading of the news as such, the Twitter discourses developed differently than the mass media reporting. Twitter users infrequently passed on information on the discussion in the arena of professional politics as reported by the news media, but rather provided alternative background information and interpretation. In the Pelinka case for example, users reflected on the long history of nepotism in Austria and brought comparable cases within the ORF and the SPÖ to mind. Some users analysed Pelinka's career asking for the reasons he was qualified for the job, others developed theories on the role of his father (an influential journalist) and his uncle (a famous political scientist) in the events. Prominent journalists publicly announced on Twitter that they would apply for the job themselves, stating they would be much better qualified according to the original job description. Some users called for civil disobedience to protest the decision of the ORF director by stopping to pay the TV licence fees, which was broadly supported by other Twitter users. In the Scheuch case, users drew comparisons to other court decisions, praised or condemned the judge, and raised questions about the legal base for Scheuch's announcement to stay in power until the appellate proceeding. They reflected on the history of corruption in Austria, discussed the impact on the federal elections, and the future of Carinthia's government. Users discussed whether politicians are out of touch with reality in general, satirically envisioned how Scheuch would survive in jail, and stated who of Austria's politicians should be imprisoned next.

Communication research has long emphasised how the reception of political and societal events depends on conversations about news in people's immediate social context. It helps them to make sense of what happens in the world by connecting the news to personal experiences and embed them into social relevance structures. They put the news to a "social reality test" and shape "public perceptions of issue salience" (Erbring, Goldenberg, & Miller, 1980, p. 41). On Twitter, such processes of social negotiation of the meaning of news happen right away, because the messages diffusing the news may already include interpretation. Twitter users often connect current events to personal experiences, opinions, and world-views, they explain, classify, interpret, and reinterpret what they have received. This way, a much wider range of aspects may be included in Twitter discourses than in news reports. Events may get connected to other topics by the way there are framed by the users. Thus, Twitter may provide information and comment far beyond the event itself, massively enriching the traditional news media reporting—or even triggering it, as in the discussion about ACTA, for instance. Observing political discourses unfold on Twitter is observing the process of the social negotiation of the meaning of news.

## Networking Objects—Modelling the Networked Public Sphere

Tweets are media objects connected to other objects by hyperlinks. This network of objects is part of the ‘material’ base of the networked public sphere, and following the links between those objects—surfing the web—is the central mode of activity to access information. In 2002, Foot and Schneider coined the term “web sphere” for a relatively stable cluster of websites defined by their structure of interlinkages that ‘host’ discourses on certain broadly defined topics like domestic politics. The notion of “blogosphere” has the same meaning for clusters of blogs, and has been used in research to map the virtual places certain discourses become manifest in and the interconnections of those places (e.g., Bruns & Adams, 2009; Etling, Kelly, Faris, & Palfrey, 2010). Research on Twitter spheres has focused on networks that emerge from the common use of hashtags (Bruns, 2012; Bruns & Burgess, 2011). However, a lot of tweets do not contain hashtags (Ausserhofer & Maireder, forthcoming; Small, 2011), although they are still part of a specific discourse.

Besides forming a sphere themselves, tweets provide access points to the networked public sphere in general, because they heavily link to content elsewhere on the web (Maireder, 2011). In a media ecology where the circulation of content heavily depends on the users’ active participation (Jenkins, 2006, p. 3), these links are important for the distribution of attention to specific media objects. Between 40 and 56% of all tweets analysed within the three case studies discussed earlier included links (Maireder, 2012). A large share of those links, between 46 and 74%, referred to news media reports, about 20% to blogs and other user-generated content, up to 22% to press releases on the platform of the Austrian Press Agency, and the rest to content published by political parties, NGOs, NPOs, or companies other than media (see Figure 2). In the Scheuch and Pelinka cases, a substantial share of tweets directly linked to press releases by politicians published on the platform of Austrian Press Agency’s distribution service. In all three cases, the first hours after the initial incidents were dominated by links to news media, while links to blog posts and other user-generated content were posted later on. News articles were shared within a limited period of time after their initial publishing, usually a couple of hours, but popular blog posts were shared and reshared for days. It seems that professional news is faster, but commentary has a longer life span.

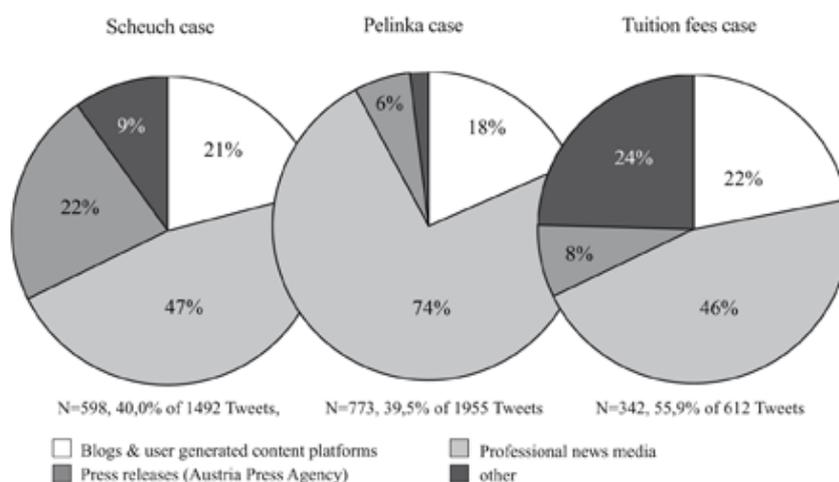


Figure 2: Target sites of links in tweets in the three cases, in per cent of all tweets containing URLs

While it is obvious that articles produced by professional editors are of high interest within general political discourses (even in the context of social media), the other content is particularly interesting. In the Scheuch and tuition fees cases, more than half of the links tweeted led to content not produced by news media, and in the Pelinka case about a quarter. For example, in the latter case four individual private blog posts were shared several times, all of them taking Pelinka as a starting point for a general critique of the allegedly nepotistic and corrupt political culture of Austria. In the Scheuch case, a YouTube video of a 1990 song by German punk-rock band Die Ärzte entitled “Uwe sitzt im Knast” (Uwe is in prison) was shared several times. Another piece linked to a number of times was a 5-year-old press release by the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) pointing to a lawsuit filed in Hungary for a different charge in which Scheuch was condemned. While member of the FPÖ in 2011, Scheuch had been a member of another party (BZÖ) in 2006. By tweeting this press release, users emphasised the fact that the same actors that defended Scheuch in the current case had condemned him for similar reasons back in 2006. In the tuition fee case, several links led to a list of political demands a popular student protest movement had drafted in 2009.

None of this content had a direct connection to the current cases, since all of it had been produced in other periods of time and other contexts. Nonetheless they were included into the discourses, because they carried new meaning within the current context. The students’ demands were reread on the background of the ministers’ proposal, the old press release on Scheuch pointed to the flip-flopping of political personnel on the far right and the contradiction of political messages, and the music video helped abstracting the case in a humorous way. Users had reframed the content to connect it to current discourses (see Leavitt, this volume).

In communication research, the concept of framing refers to techniques used in texts to semantically emphasize “specific aspects of perceived reality” (Scheufele, 2007, p. 65). Frames “draw boundaries, set up categories, define some ideas as out and others in, and generally operate to snag related ideas in their net” (Reese, 2007, p. 150). Traditionally, the term is used to refer to the way journalists make certain schemata manifest within their texts, but Weaver (2007, p. 144) emphasises the ambiguity and the comprehensive nature of the framing concept that can be applied to many different aspects and types of messages.

For discourses manifest in networked media elements, the way the relation between the elements is constructed may be crucial to the way users perceive them (Harrison, 2011). In the cases discussed here, users pre-framed media objects to integrate them into the current discourses by referring to the cases within the text part of their tweets. This kind of framing, however, was not specific of the links mentioned above, but was observed for large parts of the links in general. An analysis of the tone of the messages showed that links to news reports were framed less interpretatively than those to press releases or blogs and other user-generated content. However, depending on the case, between 22 and 50% of the links to news media were framed by a personal interpretation, whereat about two-thirds in a sober tone, and one-third sarcastically or aggressively. These numbers are even higher for other content.

Links in tweets connect the Twitter discourse to the networked public sphere in general, providing access to media objects and their relations that form its material base. In the political discourses examined here, the links in tweets referred to manifold news reports, blog posts, YouTube videos, press releases, and much more, connecting those objects to the Twitter conversations. By framing the links, users introduced certain schemata to perceive the objects linked to, reinterpreting their meaning and negotiating their position within the networked public discourses.

### **Networking People—Cutting Across Social Boundaries**

Twitter is a social network medium, because the structure of the information flow is based on networks between accounts that represent social actors. Beyond that, Twitter's @mention function is used to address or reference other users, enabling conversation throughout a network of interconnected actors that boyd, Golder, and Lotan (2010, p. 1) describe as "a public interplay of voices that gives rise to an emotional sense of shared conversational context." Research on Twitter and political protest found that the platform facilitates the integration of very different actors into a common conversation (Maireder & Schwarzenegger, 2012), and holds opportunities to cut across and connect diverse social networks (Segeberg & Bennett, 2011). Political conversations on Twitter thus hold opportunities for users to enlarge their personal network, and for political actors to connect to other professionals as well as politically active citizens.

In Austria, Twitter is only used by about 1% of the population, but it is increasingly popular with professionals operating around the political centre (Ausserhofer & Maireder, forthcoming). Many journalists, PR professionals, politicians, political activists, and experts have turned to Twitter for news sharing, self-presentation, and conversation among people with an interest in domestic politics. Because those actors rather address each other than a general public (at least compared to mass media), they may form what Davis (2010, p. 754) has called an "online elite discourse network." Like the Swedish political twittersphere researched by Larsson and Moe (2011; also see this volume), Austria's political Twitter users rather form an information and conversation network of people already engaged in politics than a communication platform that integrates the political centre and the periphery.

The users identified as Austria's political Twitter elite in the study on the Austrian political twittersphere introduced in the first section (Ausserhofer & Maireder, forthcoming), intensely interact with each other. More than two-thirds of the tweets on domestic politics included at least one @mention to another user, and about half of the @mentions referred to a user of the elite network itself. This means that political professionals form a densely knit communication network among themselves, but at the same time each of them also heavily interacts with dispersed users outside of the core network. In the exchange of news, arguments, and interpretations on political events described above, they connect to each other on a day-to-day basis and form a political discourse sphere structurally independent from the traditional arena of politics, but, of course, connected to it by their official affiliations and real-life interactions.

In addition to such political professionals, there are several users in the centre of the network that have no professional affiliation to the traditional political arena, as well as



@florianklenk), experts (@Hubertsickinger) and 'casual citizens' (@AnChVIE). Except from the oppositional Green party's @michelreimon, a local representative in the province of Burgenland, there are hardly any politicians addressed in the discussions about Pelinka. No member of the social democratic party, who could have defended Pelinka's employment, is participating.

For the political arena in the United Kingdom, Davis (2010) has stated that the Internet has led to "a significant increase in the communicative links between those in and around the UK political centre," (p. 754) and thus more means of exchange and deliberation. This is certainly true for the Austrian political twittersphere, but analyses have also shown that Twitter holds opportunities for politically interested but unaffiliated users to become integral actors within the sphere of discourse of the political centre. Moreover, Twitter allows casual citizens to observe conversations of the political elite and, if they like, to participate in those conversations. Even though the elite preferably refer to each other, they do interact with other users and from time to time include their views into the debate by retweeting them or referring to them.

## **Conclusion**

Deuze (2008) describes Internet users as "bricoleurs" to emphasise the "highly personalized, continuous, and more or less autonomous assembly, disassembly, and reassembly of mediated reality" in digital culture (p. 66). The reality of political discourses Twitter users experience is shaped by the bricolage of messages and media objects they access through their individually composed streams, an assembly produced in a process of networking meaning by dispersed actors mutually referencing each other. The networking of topics, media objects, and people in the course of political discourses, as described in this text, are heavily entangled processes that reorganise the users' experiences of the political. Those users participating in the discourses find themselves within a public social negotiation of the meaning of political events, for themselves, for their social network, for the actors of the political arena, and thus for society in general. The arguments presented here are another indicator for the gradual reallocation of the construction of political meaning from the mass media system to a "networked public sphere" (Benkler, 2006), advanced by the socialisation of media experiences.

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