

# Who is leading the campaign charts? Comparing individual popularity on old and new media

## Abstract

Attention in the mass media is seen as crucial for electoral success. However, most ordinary candidates hardly get any attention in the news. With social media outlets becoming ever-more popular, the question is whether the overall asymmetry in attention for candidates still holds today. Do candidates who dominate the traditional media during the campaign also dominate the social media? Or can candidates make up for a lack of mass media coverage by attracting attention on these new media platforms? This paper aims to answer these questions by paring Twitter activity and Twitter popularity with newspaper attention for a large number of individual candidates in the 2014 Belgian election campaign. We expand the normalization versus equalization debate by not only looking at how much a new medium is used, but also at its success in terms of popularity and audience reach. Our findings show that the two platforms are indeed related, mainly because a small political elite dominates both old and new media. Twitter popularity and Twitter activity (albeit to a lesser extent) are higher among powerful politicians. We elaborate on why these findings are so much in line with the normalization hypothesis.

**Key words:** Twitter, mass media, election campaigns, normalization

## Introduction

Traditionally, election campaigns are won in the mass media. Candidates that can attract plenty of journalistic attention and appear most on television and in newspapers are mostly also those that perform well on Election Day. Candidates' best bet, then, always used to be to aim for getting attention through these mass media outlets. However, studies in different contexts have shown that media attention is distributed highly unequally over politicians, meaning that most of them remain outside the media's spotlights (Tresch, 2009; Wolfsfeld, 2011). The central query of this paper is whether this knowledge still holds to this day, when social media outlets are becoming ever more popular. Do social media provide a more equal playing field with more politicians getting a share of the attention? Or does it remain 'politics as usual', with social media having the same focus on a limited number of elite actors? These conflicting expectations reflect the so-called equalization and normalization hypotheses, respectively (Gibson & McAllister, 2014; Lilleker et al., 2011). While some scholars argue that social media create a more open and equal platform for politicians to reach out, others temper these positive expectations and stress that the new media are driven by the same dynamics that affected traditional news media.

In this study, we test these conflicting assumptions using data from the 2014 Belgian election campaign. Rather than focusing on political parties, we direct our attention to individual politicians – and to their Twitter accounts in particular (see also Enli & Skogerbø, 2013; Hong & Nadler, 2012; Vergeer & Hermans, 2013). Here, the question is whether the normalization hypothesis holds for Twitter, or if there are indications that it is a separate platform that in contrast to traditional media focuses less on a handful of elite politicians. For a vast number of individual candidates, we compare their prevalence in traditional news media during the campaign with their performance on Twitter in this given period. We argue that the 'normalization versus equalization' dichotomy can not only be applied to political actors' activity on Twitter, but also to how well these activities perform in terms of audience reach. In this way, we aim to contribute to the ongoing debate on how digital media affect political competition and power hierarchies.

The paper is structured as follows. We first provide an overview of the literature about the role of old and new media in (personal) election campaigns and formulate competing hypotheses (normalization versus equalization). Departing from this review, we discuss how Twitter activity and popularity can be conceptualized using the affordances that this platform features. Next, we present our research design and the main results. Our findings show that the equalizing potential of Twitter is barely fulfilled. Although there is a more equal distribution with regard to Twitter activity of politicians, this does not translate to Twitter popularity, which's distribution is nearly as skewed as

the traditional media. Those candidates who receive most mass media attention are generally also the ones who are most popular and successful in reaching out via Twitter. A small elite group of party leaders and ministers, in particular, succeeds in dominating both traditional and new media charts. These findings largely corroborate the normalization hypothesis. In contrast, we find little support for the equalization hypothesis as Twitter popularity and (to a lesser extent) Twitter activity are higher among more powerful politicians. We elaborate on possible explanations for these findings in the discussion section and suggest pathways for further research.

### **Theory and hypotheses**

Election campaigns are a central topic of research in political communication, as their potential impact on knowledge, attitudes, and behaviour of voters is vast. The role of the mass media has always been a prominent aspect of these studies. Generally, mass media are considered as the key arena to reach out to voters and improve electoral support (e.g., Druckman, 2005; Hopmann, Vliegenthart, De Vreese, & Albæk, 2010; Norris, Curtice, Sanders, Scammell, & Semetko, 1999). The number of preferential votes, which can be considered as personal electoral capital, is positively correlated with the amount of media attention – also for lower-ranked candidates (Van Aelst, Maddens, Noppe, & Fiers, 2008). The scholarly focus on traditional mass media notwithstanding, over the last fifteen years the so-called new or digital media have gradually been included in theoretical models of campaigning (Norris, 2002; Foot & Schneider, 2006; Gibson & Cantijoch, 2011). This reflects the fact that parties and candidates now have the opportunity to reach out and interact with voters via websites, blogs and e-mail, effectively bypassing traditional mass media. More recently, scholarly attention has shifted to web campaigning 2.0, focusing on the role of social media (Gibson, Römmele, & Williamson, 2014; Jackson & Lilleker, 2009; Jungherr, 2016).

#### *Social media between normalization and equalization*

Ever since the introduction of new media in politics, the scholarly debate is characterized by a dispute between optimistic and more pessimistic views on the democratic opportunities of these new communication technologies (Dahlgren, 2005; Margolis & Resnick, 2000). Although studies often provided mixed or nuanced support for both viewpoints (Gibson & McAllister, 2014), the contradiction is still reflected in contemporary theoretical reflections on social media and politics. The normalization hypothesis suggests few changes in media dynamics and power structures, while the equalization hypothesis posits the opposite, expecting a more diverse range of actors and voices in public discourse. Therefore, the latter is sometimes labelled more generally as the ‘transformation thesis’ (Jungherr, 2014b) or ‘innovation hypothesis’ (Larsson, 2013), while normalization is often labelled ‘politics as usual’ (Gibson & Ward, 1998). The normalization versus equalization thesis is

traditionally used to study the online activities of political parties in election times. According to the equalization hypothesis, smaller parties can compensate for their lack of media attention by being more present and more innovative online. In contrast, the normalization hypothesis suggests that larger parties have more resources to deploy more professional engaging online activities, thereby re-establishing the existing hierarchy (Lilleker et al., 2011). In this respect, the focus has mainly been on the (quality of the) web performance of parties, and more recently also on individual politicians' efficacy (e.g. Hong & Nadler, 2012; Mascheroni & Mattoni, 2012). However, we argue that social media allow to extend the normalization vs equalization debate from activity to the level of social media reach. By looking at the success of politicians' social media presence, it becomes possible to add an 'effect' or audience component to the debate (see also Larsson & Moe, 2014). To put it differently, "who speaks" and "who gets heard" are two different questions (Hindeman, 2009; Hong & Nadler, 2016). Equalization would then imply that lower profile political actors, too, reach a considerable audience, while normalization would mean that only powerful actors, those who already receive a disproportionate amount of attention in traditional media, score high in terms of online audience reach. As indicators of power, we account for ballot list position and incumbency.

In this study we try to contribute to the normalization-equalization literature by formulating competing hypotheses relating to different dimensions of this debate. In terms of activity, we expect politicians across the board to be fairly active on Twitter, certainly in election time. First, this is because politicians are not dependent on journalists to use this medium. With this in mind, Fenton (2012) even speaks of a "politics of non-representation", as communication with the electorate can occur unmediated by traditional mass media. On Twitter, currently every published tweet appears in all timelines of people who follow its sender. Thus, compared to the traditional media, politicians are arguably more autonomous in their means of communication, which in turn can be translated into a lower dependency on the traditional gatekeepers. Second, the use of social media such as Twitter demands comparably few resources. Twitter use is free of costs, and producing these short messages requires little technical knowledge or time. This ease of use contrasts with the web 1.0 era, since building a personal website consumes more time and resources (Zittel, 2009), which also explained why minor parties often failed to use all interactive and mobilizing potential of their websites (Schweitzer, 2011). Therefore, as a fast, cheap and easy medium, Twitter could have a greater equalizing potential.

Related to the audience reach of Twitter, results of previous studies are somewhat mixed, but lean mostly towards the normalization thesis. While the characteristics of social media may theoretically improve the potential of a more egalitarian political landscape, empirical evidence seems to temper

high expectations. For instance, Gerhards & Schäfer (2010) show that the online presence of actors that deal with one particular issue (human genome research) strongly resembled that of traditional media coverage in both the US and Germany. The recent study of Hong and Nadler (2016) shows that the online presence of interest groups is even more concentrated online than offline. In particular, a small group of large organizations with large online network (measured in terms of Twitter followers) is responsible for this unequal distribution of political voices. Studies about e-campaigning by political parties in the Web 2.0 era also seem to favour the normalization hypothesis, which entails that political actors who are already powerful offline tend to be much more successful in reaching a larger audience on social media as well (Klinger, 2013). Nonetheless, exceptions have been found, which provide alternative evidence for the role of Twitter and its impact on the political debate. In Germany, for example, the non-establishment Pirate Party obtained a sustainable position in the debate on social media (Jungherr, 2014a; Jungherr, Jürgens, & Schoen, 2012). In a similar manner, in the Netherlands, candidates of opposition parties were somewhat more active on Twitter and had a larger follower base (Vergeer, Hermans, & Sams, 2011).

Besides studying Twitter as a separate platform, we are also interested in the extent to which Twitter affects the traditional media. Or, put differently, do Twitter activity and Twitter popularity have a real influence on who matters in the campaign? The 'potentially powerful dynamic' between mainstream and social media has been identified as an important research gap in the field (Enli & Moe, 2013: 642). Some recent studies have provided insight into this relationship (e.g. Vargo, Guo, McCombs, & Shaw, 2014), but seldom these studies are related to the normalization versus equalization debate. An exception is Jungherr (2014) who examined the temporal interaction between Twitter messages and campaign coverage in the traditional media. He found very similar patterns of attention for the leading politicians on both platforms, but for other actors there was much more variation.

To test whether the normalization or rather the equalization thesis is more plausible, we employ three indicators. For each indicator, we formulate a hypothesis in line with the normalization thesis and, conversely, one corresponding to the equalization thesis. Table 1 presents these competing hypotheses. First, we look at the distribution of candidates on Twitter activity and Twitter popularity during the 2014 election campaign, compared to the distribution of candidates on traditional media. In the case of normalization, one would expect that like coverage in the traditional media, Twitter activity and popularity are unequally divided between candidates, with a small group of politicians being most active and most popular. On the other hand, if the opposite equalization hypothesis holds, we would find that compared to the traditional media, the distribution of Twitter activity and popularity are more equally distributed amongst candidates. Second, we distinguish between higher

and lower positioned candidates and look whether they differ in terms of Twitter activity and popularity. Being a high profile political candidate (meaning having a high ballot list position and good political experience) is an important predictor for media attention (Van Aelst et al., 2008). In the case of normalization, we would therefore find a similar pattern, with high profile candidates being the most active and popular. The equalization hypothesis, on the other hand, posits that Twitter offers new opportunities for the low profile candidates, meaning that lower and high profile candidates share a more equal degree of activity and popularity on Twitter. Third, we measure the effect of Twitter activity and popularity on traditional media attention. In the case of equalization, we would expect that Twitter offers opportunities for low profile candidates to get in the news. Thus, candidates who traditionally would not be covered in the news may get covered due to the fact that they are active and popular on Twitter. Under the normalization hypothesis on the other hand we expect that journalists only looks at the activity and popularity of the 'usual suspects' on Twitter.

< insert Table 1 about here >

#### *Operationalizing Twitter activity and popularity*

In line with our hypotheses, we distinguish between Twitter activity and popularity. Twitter activity reflects politicians' activity as senders of tweets, while popularity gives an indication of politicians' success on the platform. Both popularity and activity are rooted in social media's principle of datafication (van Dijck and Poell 2013). Datafication refers to the tracking and quantification of our online interactions, which in turn allows for their interpretation in a comparable manner. Since we are primarily interested in what happens during the election campaign, we study Twitter activity and popularity in the four weeks before Election Day. Also, the relationship between Twitter and traditional media attention is limited to this selected time-span. Therefore, we focus on *temporal* Twitter popularity measures, and not on a politicians' follower counts, which can be considered as a form of *long-standing* popularity. Follower networks consist of a user's subscribers accumulated over time, mostly long before the start of the campaign. The number of followers is a key determinant in the flow of information on Twitter, as it reflects the user's primary audience (Bruns & Stieglitz, 2014). Often, famous politicians can reach a large crowd on Twitter, even without being particularly active or innovative users.

Hence, focusing on the campaign dynamics, we operationalize politicians' temporal popularity as comprising two of Twitter's specific features, namely *mentions* and *retweets*. *Mentions* are part of the micro layer of communication on Twitter, reflecting interpersonal communication between users (Bruns & Moe, 2014). Using the "@username"-expression within a tweet, one can address specific

other users, regardless whether there exists a follower-followee connection or not. Mentions are both conversational, as well as referential markers. As a conversational marker, it can be used to join in the 'chain of replies' to another's tweet. More specifically, replies are "@username"-expressions placed at the beginning of the message. However, for reasons of clarity, we use the label 'mentions' to refer to all "@username"-expressions. As a referential marker, they can be used to refer to another user, using his/her Twitter username (e.g. "I will vote for @politicianX tomorrow") (Bruns & Moe, 2014; Honeycutt & Herring, 2009). In both cases, they make the user visible and are reflective of the user's importance on the platform (Ausserhofer & Maireder, 2013). *Retweets* can be used by users to share, or reproduce, existing content, and thereby contribute to the visibility of other users (and their tweets) in the network. Incoming retweets are argued to reflect users' role as sources of information (Bruns & Stieglitz, 2014). More than is the case with replies or mentions, retweets have the potential to go beyond the user's follower network. Like retweets, favorites endorse particular messages, although this function is less documented in extant literature. Their meaning is ambivalent, as a favorite can not only be interpreted to signify agreement with the tweet, but it may also be used in other ways, for example as a bookmark. In sum, we argue that mentions (including replies) can be considered as an indicator of *personal popularity*, whereas retweets and favorites rather function as markers of *message popularity*.

The popularity measures discussed above are related to politicians' *activity* on the platform. More specifically, politicians have to send tweets in order for them to be retweeted and favorited. Witty and sharply formulated political tweets, for example, have a great potential of spreading around the network (Parmelee & Bichard, 2012). In addition, politicians can promote their candidacy and interact with citizens, journalists, and other politicians (e.g. Graham, Broersma, Hazelhoff, & van 't Haar, 2013). Here, we understand *activity* as the tweets that the candidates compose and post themselves – in other words, non-retweeted content (i.e. 'regular' tweets and replies to other users). With this restriction, we aim to focus on candidates' original user activity.

## **Research design**

To study the extent of normalization or equalization on Twitter and to investigate the relationship between Twitter and traditional media during the campaign, we rely on Twitter data from political candidates and their appearance in the newspapers in the advent of the 2014 elections in Belgium. Belgium is a proportional parliamentary democracy with a flexible list system. Consequently, not only political parties, but also individual candidates *within* these parties compete with each other for votes (Deschouwer, 2009). A higher number of preferential votes could help candidates to leapfrog

past their higher-ranked colleagues, thereby getting elected in parliament or obtain a better position in the next elections. In addition, preferential votes improve a (higher-ranked) candidates' chances of obtaining an executive mandate for candidates. Therefore, it is important for political candidates in Belgium that not only their party gets covered in the media, but that they also receive media coverage themselves.

On May 25, three elections were held simultaneously on different electoral levels (regional, federal and European). In the month before these elections (April 24 – May 24), data from Twitter and newspapers were collected. In addition, we conducted a candidate survey to gather data on other characteristics, such as age, gender, nationality, political mandates, and we combined these data with information about the ballot list position and party membership of each candidate.

Our sample is restricted to the candidates that are electable in Flanders (the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, reflecting 60% of the population in Belgium). In total, 955 of the 1519 Flemish politicians who participated in all three elections completed our survey. This means a response rate of 63% which is quite high for an expert survey. Also, chi-square tests show that this sample is fairly representative of the general population of candidates. Only with regard to party belonging, candidates of the green party are slightly overrepresented while candidates of the Far-right are slightly underrepresented. However, we do not expect this to bias our results. Of the 955 candidates who completed the survey, 492 had a Twitter account and we were able to retrieve in-depth Twitter data for 322 of them. These 322 candidates include both familiar candidates with high ballot list position and/or important executive functions, and unknown candidates, as well as an equal distribution between the different Flemish political parties. We will conduct our analyses on this sample of 322 candidates with a Twitter account.

For the collection of the Twitter data we relied on the open-source tool *yourTwapperkeeper* which is commonly used within social sciences (for a detailed overview of this tool, see Bruns & Liang, 2012). For each candidate, an archive was set up which captured tweets from and to that particular user.<sup>1</sup> As the Twitter API is the only entry point to the data, there is no base for comparison and therefore there are no guarantees for a comprehensive dataset (Highfield, Harrington, & Bruns, 2013).

As stated earlier, we focus both on Twitter activity and Twitter popularity during the election campaign. A principal component analysis (Table 2) supports the existence of these two separate dimensions. Both the number of tweets and the number of replies sent, reflect the activity of the candidate on Twitter. The second dimension, popularity, is operationalized by combining the number of retweets, favorites, mentions and replies received. Combining these measures leads to a reliable

scale with a Cronbach's alpha of .90. Correlating positively with these measures, the number of followers on Twitter might be included in the popularity scale. However, as explained before, we believe it is important to maintain Twitter followers as a separate variable as it allows a conceptual and empirical assessment of the *temporal* correspondence between Twitter popularity and mass media attention.

< insert Table 2 about here >

Attention in traditional media was captured using the Belgian *Gopress* database, which contains all Belgian newspapers. For each candidate we counted and checked the number of articles in which he or she was mentioned during the campaign (April 24 – May 24). We included all eight paid Flemish newspapers<sup>2</sup> and the free daily *Metro*.

After presenting some descriptives we run a number of regressions with temporal Twitter activity, Twitter popularity and media attention as dependent variable. As the distributions of these variables are very skewed we use natural logarithmic transformations. As controls we include a number of socio-demographic characteristics of the candidates such as gender, age and ethnicity. Moreover, we include certain traditional power indicators such as political incumbency (being a parliamentarian or Minister) and the position on the ballot list. We add extra dummies for the first and last candidates on the list, labelled respectively as the list puller and list pusher, as often these positions are occupied by party leaders (in the case of the first position) or other party figureheads (in the case of the last position). The reason to include these different indicators is that they are important predictors of receiving traditional media attention. Since Belgium has a system where parties determine the order of the ballot list position, they often put top candidates, for whom it is more easy to access the media, on the highest ballot list positions (Van Aelst et al, 2008). Also, incumbents are covered more frequently in the traditional media (Tresch, 2009; Wolfsfeld, 2011). Therefore, by including these variables in the regression we can test whether the group who is most popular on Twitter is similar to the group who gets covered most in the traditional media (normalization) or whether it is a different group of candidates which manages to become popular on Twitter (equalization). Finally, we add dummies for political parties, as well as dummies to account for whether candidates took part in the federal, Flemish or European election to account for the nested data structure.

Table 3 summarizes the variables used in our model and provides descriptive statistics. The first section of variables reflects campaign attention in traditional media, activity and popularity on Twitter during the campaign, and the Twitter follower count by the start of the campaign. We notice

here that the standard deviations for these variables are very high, which indicates a lot of variety between the different candidates. The second section of variables contains socio-demographics and political background characteristics.

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## Results

Before we investigate the relationship between the coverage in the traditional media and the new social media, it is useful to first look at these platforms separately. On average, candidates appear in eight newspaper articles (see Table 3). As the standard deviation (46.1) already suggests, the distribution is extremely skewed. Table 4 shows that close to 53% of the candidates did not receive any attention at all and 38% of the candidates were mentioned in 10 or fewer articles. In contrast, there is a very small group of candidates that were mentioned in more than 50 articles. For example, Bart de Wever, leader of the N-VA (Flemish nationalist party) which eventually won the elections, was covered in almost 800 articles in the timeframe of this research. Thus, during the election campaign, traditional media gave voice to a very select group of candidates, whereas the vast majority of the candidates received very little or no attention at all. From previous research we know that the distribution of television coverage is even more skewed in favor of the major candidates (Van Aelst et al., 2008).<sup>3</sup>

< insert Table 4 about here >

In line with the equalization hypothesis, optimism has been uttered about the potential of social media to include more voices in the debate. In comparison to traditional media, virtually anyone can access Twitter and post their messages. Regardless about half of all Flemish candidates does not have a Twitter account. Concerning the political candidates that do have a Twitter account ( $N=323$ ), there is great variation between activity, popularity and the number of followers the candidates have.

Of the candidates with a Twitter account, 13% of them did not send any tweets in the weeks prior to the election. Another 29% of candidates sent fewer than ten tweets during the four week campaign period. Only about one out of ten candidates did send more than 100 tweets and can be considered as active users. Thus, in the light of the high percentage of candidates without a Twitter account, and considering that many of the candidates with an account barely sent tweets, we can conclude that a relatively small group has embraced the use of Twitter as a campaign tool.

When we look at Twitter popularity, we notice that only one candidate out of ten did not receive any attention on Twitter. This is very different from traditional media attention, as 53% of the candidates did not receive any attention in the newspaper. Thus, if a candidate has a Twitter account, it is very likely that one will receive at least some attention from other users in the form of replies, mentions, retweets or favorites. However, it seems that most of the candidates only received up to 100 retweets, favorites, replies or mentions, and a very small number of candidates (about 7%) receives over a 1000 of these. For follower count, an indication of a candidate's long-standing Twitter popularity, we notice similarities with temporal activity and popularity in the sense that most of the candidates have a limited number of followers and a small number of candidates have a lot of followers. As shown in Table 4, almost 44% of these candidates have fewer than 200 followers, while a small group of candidates (about 8%) has 5000 or more followers. The follower base of the ten leading politicians ranges between 13.000 and 47.000.

To compare the distribution of how candidates use and perform on old and new media, Figure 1, presents the Lorenz curves of Twitter activity, popularity and media attention in newspapers. These curves show how these three variables are distributed in the sample of politicians. The x-axis depicts the percentage of politicians, while the y-axis depicts the percentage of media attention and tweets sent or received. Thus, if we focus on Twitter popularity, we notice that 80% of the politicians receive only 10% of Twitter popularity. The distribution would be fully equal if the curve has an angle of 45 degrees. The more skewed this curve is, the more unequal the distribution. The three different curves show that all our three indicators are very skewed. However, compared to the other lines, Twitter activity is more equal than media attention and temporal Twitter popularity. When we perform a Kolmogorov-Smirnoff test we find that this difference is significant, meaning that in terms of Twitter use, we do find some support for the equalization hypothesis (H1). We also performed the K-S test to compare temporal popularity on Twitter and media attention. The test shows a significant difference. Yet, if we look at Figure 1, we see that although Twitter popularity is slightly more equally distributed than media attention, this difference is not substantial. In general, temporal popularity on Twitter follows the same pattern as media attention, meaning that for Twitter popularity we find more support for the normalization hypothesis (H2).

While the descriptives and Lorenz curves show that Twitter does not create an equal playing field as only some candidates are active on the platform and as popularity is limited to a happy few, Twitter might still be equalizing in the sense that, unlike the traditional media, it does not reflect traditional political power relations. In other words, perhaps the candidates most active and popular on Twitter, are not the candidates with the highest political status. In order to test this, we run two separate

regressions with respectively Twitter activity (H3) and Twitter popularity (H4) as dependent variables. If there is equalization, we should find little or no influence of traditional power indicators such as ballot list position and political mandate. The first model in Table 5 takes Twitter activity as dependent variable. We see that especially the ballot list position predicts a candidate's activity on Twitter. In general, candidates send more tweets if they hold a better position on the ballot. Note that there is an additional effect for being the first candidate on the list. We do not find any effect of incumbency, but this can be partly explained by the fact that the candidates who have a mandate often get the highest ballot list position. Being active on Twitter hardly differs between candidates of different parties, except for those from the smaller socialist party (PVDA), who traditionally rely more on canvassing and grassroots campaigning.

Similar results are found for Twitter popularity (see Table 5). Model 1 shows that all indicators of better list position have an outspokenly positive effect on Twitter popularity. This means that the list position, as an indicator of the political status of the candidate, strongly influences success on Twitter. In this sense, Twitter popularity follows the same patterns of political power and it is difficult for lower ranked candidates to become popular on social media. However, in Model 2, the number of Twitter followers shows as a significant indicator of popularity on Twitter during the campaign, while list position loses some of its explanatory power. This suggests that candidates can partly 'rise above' their position on the list when they have been able to build an established follower base before the start of the campaign. Again, differences between parties are minimal. The fact that candidates of the Flemish nationalist party (N-VA) are relatively more popular on Twitter compared to others, can be attributed to the expected success (considering the polls) of the party in the election outcome. Also in the traditional media, the Flemish nationalist and their prominent position in the polls dominated the coverage<sup>4</sup>.

When comparing the explained variance of the different regressions it is striking that we are much better to explain popularity compared to activity. This means that the indicators for influence of power have a significant yet limited impact on Twitter activity, while they are much more determining in the case of Twitter popularity. We thus find clear support for the normalization hypothesis for hypothesis 4 and to a smaller extent also for hypothesis 3.

<insert Table 5 here>

Based on the Lorenz curves and regression analyses we have to temper some of the optimism regarding the equal playfield of Twitter, as evidence points towards support for the normalization theory. This image is confirmed for all candidates when we run a number of regression analyses with

media attention as dependent variable and the Twitter measures as independent variables. The regression analysis enables us to control for other factors which potentially influence the relation between the traditional media and Twitter (e.g. socio-demographics and party membership). As our data are not longitudinal, and therefore we cannot know whether Twitter popularity influences media attention or vice versa, we do not claim to make any causal inferences based on these regression models with media attention during the campaign as the dependent variable.

**< insert Table 6 about here >**

Table 6 presents the impact of Twitter activity, popularity and followers on media attention. Stepwise, the different controlling variables were included to define alterations in the impact of the Twitter measures on media attention. Model 1 regresses media attention on temporal Twitter activity and popularity and the amount of followers. We add dummies for the political parties and the type of election, to account for the nested data structure (not presented in table). Candidates who generate more Twitter popularity during the elections also receive more attention in the media. We reach a similar conclusion if we look at the number of followers. Those candidates who have built a large follower base are also the ones that attract most media attention. We find a negative relationship for activity. Thus, candidates who are more active do not become more popular in the media. On the contrary, being active on Twitter and receiving media attention are negatively related. Of course, the direction of this relationship remains unclear as candidates who receive most media attention might have less incentive to actively tweet, while candidates that get very little attention in might be more active on Twitter to compensate for their lack of visibility in the mainstream media. Nevertheless, it gives support to the normalization hypothesis in relation to H5.

Model 2 shows that, when controlling for socio-demographics, the relation between the independent and the dependent variables changes very little. Hence, the positive impact of Twitter popularity on media attention during the campaign still holds. However, it is plausible that leading candidates explain the relation between Twitter popularity and media attention and fully drive the previous models. Therefore, in our final model, we add list position, dummies for the list puller and the list pusher and a dummy for political mandate. Indeed, in Model 3, we notice that the effect of temporal Twitter popularity on media attention disappears once we control for list position and one's mandates. This indicates that the relationship between popularity in the traditional and in the new media exists primarily because a small political elite (mainly party leaders and ministers), receive most of the media coverage and are also the most popular politicians on Twitter. With regard to the hypotheses this means that we find support for the normalization hypothesis (H6). However, the

number of followers, or long-standing Twitter popularity, remains a significant indicator of media attention. We will come back to this finding in the conclusion.

Finally, we notice that when comparing the models in Table 6 and Table 5, we find that older candidates get more attention in the traditional news media (see Table 6), while younger candidates score significantly better in terms of Twitter popularity (see Table 5). This indicates that for younger politicians Twitter might be more relevant, or at least that using Twitter is more integrated in their personal campaign. With caution, we can read this finding as a sign that things may change in the future.

### **Conclusion and discussion**

Over the years election campaigns have become more complex and multi-dimensional. New, mainly digital, media have entered the electoral arena, but the traditional media have maintained a central place in the campaign. Although campaign studies have devoted much attention to the use and effects of new social media, their relationship with the traditional media has remained underexplored. This study aimed to get a better idea of how old and new media go together by studying a large number of individual candidates. Overall, we cannot claim that during the campaign popularity on Twitter leads to more newspaper articles or vice versa. However, the two platforms are closely related: candidates who have a prominent position in the media are generally also the ones who are more popular on Twitter. This is not so much because more mentions or replies translate directly into a higher coverage in the traditional media, but mainly because a small political elite of predominantly party leaders and ministers is successful on both platforms. This elite receives almost all news coverage and at the same time is most successful in having impact with the tweets they send and generating some buzz. At the same time, we found that being more active on Twitter does not influence one's media attention. While candidates may employ Twitter as a way to get in the newspaper, our results suggest that in general this is not a successful strategy, especially if one is not part of the political elite. The young politician who is able to get media attention via successful tweeting seems to be the exception rather than the rule<sup>5</sup>. In this respect, our findings fit the normalization hypothesis.

As for now, opportunities for less prominent political candidates to get media attention via Twitter are very limited. From the perspective of an ordinary candidate these results are not very encouraging. Campaigns are still run via the mass media, in which a limited number of candidates appear in the spotlights. Even though commenters have been optimistic about the new opportunities Twitter may offer, enabling alternative candidates to be heard, our study shows that we should tone

down these expectations, at least for now. The normalization thesis even holds when we discard traditional media and look at Twitter only. Higher ranked political candidates dominate in terms of Twitter popularity, and are also more active on Twitter than lower ranked politicians. However, these political status measures explained only a limited amount of the variance in Twitter activity, which indicates that there are also ordinary candidates among the top Twitter users. It is the only hypothesis (H1) that is somewhat in line with the equalization thesis, while the five other hypotheses rather support the normalization thesis. In addition, also a politicians' follower base serves as a relevant explanatory variable that might provide opportunities for ordinary politicians. Long-term success on the platform is significantly related to media attention, whereas temporal Twitter popularity does not improve media attention.

How can we explain these rather conservative findings? We believe there at least some reasons to assume that the equalizing power of Twitter is somewhat larger in other countries and for other time periods. First, it seems that Belgium is not an early adaptor when it comes to microblogging. The adoption rate of Twitter in Belgium (Flanders), which is less than 20%, lags behind that other social media platforms, such as Facebook (63%).<sup>6</sup> In comparison, the Netherlands, where up to 27% of the population uses Twitter (Comscore, 2011) is amongst the top countries concerning active Twitter use (Semiocast, 2012). This might also explain why a majority of Dutch politicians is very active on Twitter (Graham, Jackson, & Broersma, 2014; Spierings & Jacobs, 2014), while in Belgium the majority of candidates is not (yet) making use of this social medium. Second, an election campaign might not be the most obvious event to expect a more diverse representation of political actors. Several studies in political communication have shown that the dynamics between media and politics are different in campaign periods compared to routine periods. For instance, in election times the media seldom introduce a new issue on the agenda as all political parties and major candidates are more active than ever (Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006). Furthermore, election periods are well announced in advance and news outlets carefully plan how to cover them, leaving little room for innovation or unexpected news. As Jungherr (2014a: 254) notes in his study on Twitter and traditional media coverage, campaigns are 'highly structured and ritualized'. For this reason, he expects that 'non-traditional actors rise to greater prominence during other times'. In addition, an election campaign might also be too short for candidates to become an important player on social media and boost one's presence in the traditional media. In that sense, our finding that the amount of followers on Twitter contributed significantly to explain media attention is important. It indicates that politicians need to invest in building a larger follower base outside election time. Perhaps journalists value this long-term form of popularity more compared to the short-term success of a few popular tweets during the campaign.

To conclude, further research is needed to validate our findings in other countries and outside campaign periods. Next, we need to deepen our understanding of the mechanisms behind the interaction between old and new media. In particular, three streams of research seem necessary to develop further. First, we need to know more on how journalists use social media as a source of political information in their daily job and how activities of politicians influence their perceptions on the newsworthiness of these actors. Second, also looking more in-depth to those candidates and tweets that are successful in making it into the news could improve our understanding of the interrelatedness of traditional and new forms of political communication. Finally, it would be useful to consider the effects of Twitter on the election results. Although Twitter activity does not generate more traditional media attention, it might still be a useful strategy for ordinary candidates if it leads to more preferential votes. When studying different sorts of impact of Twitter this study at least showed that it is important to distinguish between different aspects of social media use by politicians.

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## Figures and Tables

**Table 1: Competing hypothesis on the normalizing or equalizing role of Twitter in the election campaign**

	Normalization	Equalization
H1: distribution of Twitter <b>activity</b>	... as unequal as mass media attention	... more equal than mass media attention
H2: distribution of Twitter <b>popularity</b>	... as unequal as mass media attention	... more equal than mass media attention
H3: Higher profile candidates have a	... higher degree of Twitter activity	... equal/lower degree of Twitter activity
H4: Higher profile candidates have a	... higher degree of Twitter popularity	... equal/lower degree of Twitter popularity
H5: Twitter activity does ...	... NOT lead to more media attention	... lead to more media attention
H6: Twitter popularity does ...	... NOT lead to more media attention	... lead to more media attention

**Table 2: The factor loadings of the different Twitter metrics (Varimax rotated)**

	<b>Component 1 (Activity)</b>	<b>Component 2 (Temporal popularity)</b>
Tweets sent	<b>.873</b>	.338
Replies sent	<b>.962</b>	.056
Retweets received	.124	<b>.961</b>
Favorites received	.237	<b>.931</b>
Replies received	.348	<b>.905</b>
Mentions received	.083	<b>.927</b>

**Table 3: Descriptive statistics of variables used in analysis**

Variable name	Mean (S.E)	Freq (%)
<i>Media attention</i>	8.27(46.1)	
<i>Twitter activity</i>	20.73(57.7)	
<i>Twitter popularity</i>	255.06(768.9)	
- <i>Personal popularity</i>	112.63(333.4)	
- <i>Message popularity</i>	142.43(459.1)	
<i>Follower count</i>	1581.76(4461.0)	
<i>Age</i>	42.98(11.9)	
<i>Gender</i>		
- Male		345(55.2%)
- Female		280(44.8%)
<i>Political mandate</i>		
- Yes		204(32.6%)
- No		421(67.4%)
<i>Ethnic origin</i>		
- Belgian or European		584(93.4%)
- Non-European		41(6.6%)
<i>Election level</i>		
- Regional		328(52.5%)
- Federal		272(43.5%)
- European		25(4.0%)
<i>Political party</i>		
- Flemish regionalists		90(14.4%)
- Christian Democrats		90(14.4%)
- Green Party		122(19.5%)
- Social Democrats		89(14.2%)
- Far-Right party		58 (9.3%)
- Liberal party		91(14.6%)
- Socialists		85(13.6%)

**Table 4: Media attention, Twitter activity, Twitter popularity and Follower count (N=323).**

Newspaper articles	% Candidates	Activity	% Candidates	Popularity	% Candidates	Follower count	% Candidates
0	52.8%	0	13.3%	0	9.6%	0-100	25.4%
1-10	38.2%	1-10	29.4%	1-100	63.2%	101-200	18.3%
11-20	3.4%	11-20	14.9%	101-250	9.9%	201-500	23.4%
21-50	1.9%	21-50	19.5%	251-500	6.8%	500-1000	10.5%
51-100	2.1%	51-100	12.8%	501-1000	3.4%	1001-2500	8.3%
>100	1.6%	>100	10.2%	>1000	7.1%	2501-5000	6.2%
						>5000	8.0%

**Table 5: OLS regressions with Twitter activity and Twitter popularity as dependent variables.**

	Twitter activity (log)		Twitter popularity (log)	
	Model 1	Model 1	Model 1	Model 2
	b(SE)	b(SE)	b(SE)	b(SE)
Male	.295(.34)	.251(.33)	.045(.18)	
Age	-.032(.02)	-.060(.02)**	-.033(.01)**	
Non-European background	.188(.75)	-.143(.72)	-.642(.39)	
Political mandate	-.279(.38)	.035(.36)	.071(.20)	
List position	.049(.02)*	.106(.02)**	.041(.01)**	
First on the list	1.599(.53)**	3.406(.51)**	.696(.32)*	
Last on the list	.364(.72)	2.377(.69)**	.753(.40)	
Activity (log)			.564(.04)**	
Follower count			.710(.07)**	
<i>Political party (ref. Christian Democrats)</i>				
- Flemish regionalists	-.168(.53)	.603(.51)	.768(.28)**	
- Green Party	-.608(.56)	-1.073(.53)*	-.412(.29)	
- Social Democrats	-.939(.57)	-.739(.55)	-.013(.30)	
- Far-Right party	-.579(.76)	-1.109(.72)	-.373(.39)	
- Liberal party	-.477(.56)	-.072(.53)	.140(.29)	
- Socialists	-2.593(.88)**	-2.750(.84)**	-.328(.47)	
<i>Electoral level (ref. Flemish)</i>				
- Federal	-.212(.33)	-.180(.31)	.105(.17)	
- European	1.536(1.038)	1.942(.99)	.721(.54)	
Constant	3.896(.83)**	5.999(.79)**	-.778(.59)	
<b>N</b>	<b>322</b>	<b>322</b>	<b>322</b>	
<b>R<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>.063</b>	<b>.264</b>	<b>.783</b>	

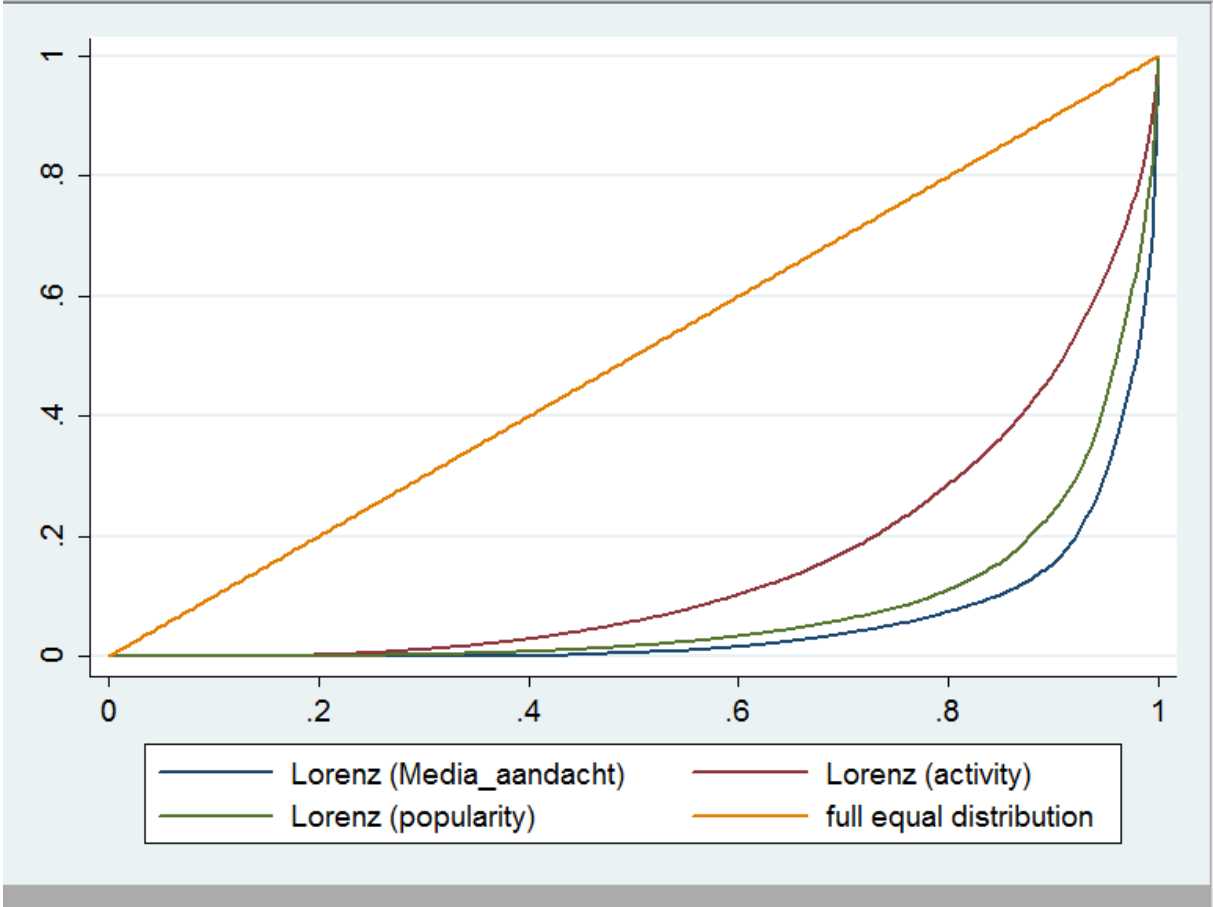
\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$

**Table 6: OLS regressions with the logged media as dependent variable.**

<b>Media coverage (log)</b>	<b>Model 1</b> b(SE)	<b>Model 2</b> b(SE)	<b>Model 3</b> b(SE)
Twitter activity (log)	-.208(.06)**	-.210(.06)*	-.109(.05)*
Temporal Twitter popularity (log)	.166(.07)*	.206(.07)**	.094(.06)
Follower count (log)	.770(.09)**	.696(.09)**	.441(.09)**
Male		.274(.21)	.275(.19)
Age		.032(.01)**	.015(.01)**
Non-European background		-.217(.46)	-.008(.43)
Political mandate			.206(.22)
List position			.057(.01)**
List puller			1.283(.43)**
List pusher			1.922(.35)**
<i>Political party (ref. Christian Democrats)</i>			
- Flemish regionalists	-.514(.33)	-.576(.32)	-.282(.30)
- Green Party	-.600(.33)	-.570(.33)	-.610(.32)
- Social Democrats	-.139(.35)	-.048(.35)	-.005(.32)
⌘ Far-Right party	-.843(.44)	-.656(.44)	-.866(.43)*
- Liberal party	-.414(.34)	-.424(.34)	-.197(.31)
- Socialists	-1.086(.52)*	-1.044(.51)*	-1.468(.50)**
<i>Electoral level (ref. Flemish)</i>			
- Federal	-.028(.20)	.004(.20)	-.215(.18)
- European	.358(.64)	.269(.63)	.430(.59)
<b>N</b>	<b>322</b>	<b>322</b>	<b>322</b>
<b>R<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>.420</b>	<b>.446</b>	<b>.531</b>

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$

Figure 1: Lorenz curves of Twitter popularity, Twitter activity and mass media attention



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<sup>1</sup> *yourTwrapperkeeper* (Available at: <http://github.com/jobrieniii/yourTwrapperKeeper>) is based on the Twitter streaming API, through which keywords can be “tracked”. Aside the “track” parameter (which captures activity *to* a particular user), we also included the “follow” parameter to get Twitter activity *from* that particular user (For more information: <https://dev.twitter.com/docs/streaming-apis/parameters#follow>).

<sup>2</sup> These newspapers are the broadsheets *De Morgen*, *De Standaard* and *De Tijd*, the popular papers *Het Laatste Nieuws* and *Het Nieuwsblad*, and the more regional oriented papers *Het Belang van Limburg*, *de krant van West-Vlaanderen* and *De Gazet van Antwerpen*.

<sup>3</sup> In the 2014 campaign only 7% of the candidates appeared at least once in one of the major television news broadcasts during the campaign. Therefore, we decided to focus on newspaper data only.

<sup>4</sup> According to the Flemish Newsmonitor the Flemish nationalists (N-VA) accounted for 36% of all mentions of parties and candidates in both newspapers and television news broadcasts

<sup>5</sup> For instance, Kristof Calvo, a young MP of the Green party, was able to score the third place on the Twitter Popularity index without being very present in the traditional media. Another relative young politician, Alexander De Croo, Minister for the liberal party, stated in an interview that his steep political career was pushed by his success on twitter. De Croo has by far the most followers of all Belgian politicians.

<sup>6</sup> iMinds-iLab.o (2013) Digimeter Report 6. Adoption and usage of Media & ICT in Flanders. Ghent: iMinds-iLab.o.