

Chapter 43

Amplification and Virtual Back–Patting: The Rationalities of Social Media Uses in the Nina Larsson Web Campaign

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the rationalities of politicians' social media uses in Web-campaigning in a party-based democracy. This is done from an in-depth case study of a Swedish politician, Nina Larsson, who with the help of a PR agency utilized several social media platforms in her campaign to become re-elected to the parliament in 2010. By analyzing how and for what purposes Larsson used social media in her Web-campaign, this chapter concludes that even though discourses of instrumental rationality and of communicative rationality were common to make her practices relevant, Nina primarily used social media to amplify certain offline news media texts as well as to commend and support other liberal party members. Hence, from this case, the authors conclude that Web-campaigning on social media is used for expressive purposes, to negotiate and maintain an attractive political image within the party hierarchy.

INTRODUCTION

There is hype around social media, not least when it comes to election campaigning. Politicians are no doubt turning to social media in increasing numbers when campaigning today (Anduiza, 2009; Jackson & Lilleker, 2009; Montero, 2009; Zafiroopoulos & Vrana, 2009; Goldbeck et al., 2010; Grusell & Nord, 2011; Jackson & Lilleker, 2011). However the reasons for this are not ex-

plored to any great extent, especially not in party based democracies, even though theories of how and why to use social media often are implicit as background assumptions and normative lenses to frame studies of political participation on social media. There is a black box to be uncovered here. We know that politicians use social media even though most studies have revealed that the effect on electoral participation and opinion formation is small (Gibson et al., 2008; Jackson & Lilleker,

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2011; Larsson & Moe, 2011). The question then arises for what purposes do candidates use social media? Such inquiry is especially intriguing in a party-based democracy where election lists and voting behavior to a large extent still depend on political parties rather than on individual candidates.

To explore rationales for election campaigning on social media I have conducted an in-depth case-study of Nina Larsson, a young Swedish politician in her 30s, representing *Folkpartiet* (the Liberal Party) in the region of Värmland (mid-west of Sweden) in the 2010 general elections. By contracting a communication agency, *Hello Clarice*, for professional input and coaching in her social media endeavors, she is most untypical of Swedish politicians. However by her conscious and ample use of social media for campaigning purposes, she is suitable for an explorative study into the rationales of social media campaigning practices. I will attend to Nina and the design of the study more thoroughly in the forthcoming sections. I begin with outlining the analytical framework for this study, starting with definition of social media.

SOCIAL MEDIA, INDIVIDUALIZATION AND WEB-CAMPAIGNING

Social media is a contested term since it implies that traditional media would not encompass social dimensions. What is often referred to when talking about social media are online communication platforms where the *social* seems to refer to the possibility of users to influence and *interact* with the content and each other in some way or another. O'Reilly (oreilly.com/web2/archive/what-is-web-20.html, retrieved 16th April 2006) claims that for a website to be defined as *social* the user him/herself should be able to participate and contribute to the content of the site. The user should be able to take control over his/hers information and the overall design should be interactive and user-friendly. The more elaborate definition

of Social Network Sites (SNS) focuses on the possibility for users to articulate their social networks and make them visible to others (Ellison & boyd, 2007, p. 2). SNS are defined as web-based services that allow users to construct a public, or half-public profile, tie this profile to other users, sometimes self-selected, whose contacts in turn are made available by the service. In this chapter I will attend to Nina's uses of Facebook, Twitter, an interactive campaign website and two blogs. Since neither the blogs nor the interactive campaign website would fit the SNS definition by Ellison & boyd, I will use O'Reilly's more encompassing definition of social media.

The rise of social media is interlinked with heightened processes of individualization. The experience of increased personal autonomy and expressions of this are among the most debated trends in our time (see Lasch, 1979/1991; Giddens, 1991; Bauman, 2001). In accounts of the late modern era, processes of individualization are given priority over collectively shared cultural frames of references that dominated social spaces and their organization in modernity (such as family, nation, class, party affiliation et cetera). With an increase of use of online social media platforms, processes of individualization tend to become more networked in character (Castells, 2001, pp. 122-125). Hence, managing your identity on social media platforms largely revolves around connecting yourself to other nodes in the network (users, fan pages, groups et cetera). Since we lack bodily cues in computer mediated communication, connections to others are essential in the management and negotiation of ourselves online (Miller, 2008). It would therefore be wrong to conceive of late modern individualization and a sense of collectiveness as mutually exclusive. Individualism could very well be considered a form of collective identity (see also Lasch, 1979/1991). Here I find the concept of networked individualism particularly illuminating for understanding the practice of linking the individual to different groups online (see also Castells, 2001, pp. 129-133).

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