



The social media logic of political interaction: Exploring citizens' politicians' relationship on Facebook and Twitter

by **Bente Kalsnes, Anders Olof and Gunn Enli**

Abstract

This paper examines citizens' interactions with politicians in social media in what is referred to as an everyday context, unmediated by news media. Through a representative survey, we compare the influence of a series of socio-demographical variables such as political interest, age, gender and education on the interaction levels between citizens and politicians. The article argues that the social media logic can be operationalized into "connected affordances": *Redistribution*, *Interacting* and *Acknowledging* — which are the three types of user practices on Facebook and Twitter. The study finds that Facebook is a service where "ordinary" people engage in political interaction with politicians — and receive replies from politicians — while Twitter is mostly used by just a small group of the population for these purposes. Hence, the popularity of Facebook could be seen as allowing for new connections between citizens and politicians without news media as mediators. Our results suggest that the stronger the political interest the citizens express, the more connective affordances are utilized — such as commenting and sharing. Political interest also impacts what response citizens receive from political actors in social media.

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Introduction

A multifaceted term, social media services can be understood as arenas for socializing and engaging in everyday activities with friends. These services are often associated with entertainment, and to a lesser degree with formal politics (e.g., Baym, 2010). Political use of social media has nevertheless sparked interest in terms of media coverage as well as academic studies (e.g., Enli and Moe, 2013; Graham, et al., 2013; Klinger, 2013). Such uses have been debated and studied in relation to specific events such as the

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Arab Spring as well as a variety of election campaigns (e.g., Chadwick, 2013; Christensen, 2011; Graham, *et al.*, 2013; Howard and Hussein, 2011). Hence, social media platforms represent possibilities, but also limits, for political interaction. The present article makes an effort to go beyond the hype that is often associated with services like Facebook and Twitter, as suggested by Kim, *et al.* (2013) by examining in closer detail the affordances for connectivity between citizens and political actors (*i.e.*, politicians and political parties) in social media — thus bypassing news media as mediators between politicians and citizens.

Inspired by similar studies of political social media use outside of elections (Enjolras, *et al.*, 2013), we focus on a non-election period in Norway. This study compares the political uses of Facebook and Twitter by examining the influence of a series of socio-demographical variables such as age, gender, education and political interest. Norway is a country characterized by governmental stability, political consensus, and features a sophisticated ICT infrastructure as well as high levels of Internet use among its citizens (Syvertsen, *et al.*, 2014), making it an especially interesting case to study in this regard. This study bases its empirical design on the theory of social media logic to contextualize and describe the interaction between voters and politicians on social media (Dijck and Poell, 2013, see also Klinger and Svensson, 2015). Here, we draw on a representative study of citizens' interactions with politicians on social media. Our focus lies on the aforementioned services Facebook and Twitter, two of the most popular social media platforms in our context of study (MediaNorway, 2014).

Specifically, we examine three research questions: First, how many citizens connect and interact with political actors in social media; second, which affordances are most used in the interaction between citizens and political actors; and third, the apparent effect of demographic variables on political activity in social media. We start by presenting the theoretical framework related to social media logic, political interactions and social media affordances. Second, the empirical data and the applied methods are described. Third, we address how citizens are utilizing Facebook and Twitter to interact with politicians and political parties in the light of the affordances for interaction on Facebook and Twitter. Additionally, we analyze the socio-demographic characteristics of those citizens who appear to be most active in this regard. Our final section provides a discussion about the wider implications of the presented results.



Political interaction in a social media logic perspective

Online media have no doubt provided new arenas for political interaction. Nevertheless, it is still debated whether the Internet mainly engages already politically active citizens or also those politically disengaged (*e.g.*, Boulianne, 2009; Norris, 2001). While optimists are in abundance, others have suggested that the Internet has failed to become the democratic arena for participation that idealists had expected (*e.g.*, Morozov, 2011). Actions such as joining a Facebook group or retweeting a message sent by a political figure have been regarded as simplified, cognitive “quick-fix” reactions to complex political issues. The main problem, according to those critics, is that online networks are largely disconnected from institutional politics and lack what is referred to as real-life outcomes (*e.g.*, Coleman and Blumler, 2009; Larsson, 2013; Morozov, 2011). Even though social media platforms have supposedly lowered the threshold for engaging in politics by offering a wide range of means to participate, such interaction is often met with frustration and disappointment, both by voters and politicians (Lüders, *et al.*, 2014; Stromer-Galley, 2014).

However, a differing body of literature argues that such simple types of online actions should be acknowledged as legitimate forms of political expressions (*e.g.*, Lutz, *et al.*, 2014). Even though activities like redistributing a message sent by a politician or a party on Twitter must be considered low-cost compared to other forms of political engagement, studies have suggested that these low-threshold activities could be regarded as meaningful because of their political relevance for the individuals involved (Halupka, 2014). Similarly, research also indicate that various Internet services can have a mobilizing effect on those less politically inclined (*e.g.*, Weber, *et al.*, 2003). The convenience of the Internet may entice a broader set of citizens to engage in politics, and that improved access to information might reduce the knowledge differences observed across various social strata as some of the arguments here suggest (*e.g.*, Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Polat, 2005).

In sum, this strand of research argues that the Internet can reinvigorate civic life by increasing access to political information, facilitate political discussion, and offer an alternative arena for political expression and engagement — in particular for those previously unengaged (Kreiss, 2015). Nevertheless, connecting via social media platforms is a development primarily driven by citizens through social media's affordances. Citizens and political actors may have different motivations for following each other on social media (*i.e.*, spreading information vs. receiving information), but, importantly, the initiative must come from users as social media are pull

media, premised on people opting in [1]. Politicians can build a network by adding friends if they have a private Facebook profile, or adding followers through Twitter. But if political parties or politicians use a Facebook page, they cannot directly add friends or fans, but they can buy visibility or run competitions for the Facebook page.

Nevertheless, our understanding of social media's affordances and political interaction is still inadequately covered in the literature (Larsson, 2015). Affordances are often defined as "clues" in the environment that indicate possibilities for action (Gibson, 1979), and we understand affordances here as possibilities and limits for interaction and connectivity on social media platforms. Networked technologies such as Facebook and Twitter have introduced new affordances for amplifying, recording, and spreading information (boyd, 2011). Thus, the present study seeks to make a contribution by examining in closer detail the affordances for connectivity between citizens and political actors in social media.

As the popularity and utility of social media platforms have increased, scholars have started to develop theories such as social media logic (Dijck and Poell, 2013) and network media logic (Klinger and Svensson, 2015) to explain their influence. Common to both approaches is an understanding of specific mechanisms, practices and norms creating dynamics between users, platforms, mass media and institutions. These emerging dynamics are transported beyond the "boundaries" of social media services to be intertwined with so-called mass media logics or news logics. Media logic can be defined as "a set of principles or common sense rationality cultivated in and by media institutions that penetrates every public domain and dominates its organizing structure" [2]. The power of mass media is mostly exercised through discursive strategies and performative tactics, such as mass media's ability to frame reality and claim for neutrality [3]. What has changed with the introduction of social media platforms is that they inhibit a different, but often overlapping logic with mass media. Just as the relationship between politics and media is characterized by "dynamic interactions and complex interdependencies along various levels and dimensions" [4], social media logic and mass media logics are intertwined. These complex interdependencies are leading to different ways of producing content, distributing information and using media, as argued by Klinger and Svensson (2015).

Dijck and Poell identify social media logic according to four principles: *programmability*, *popularity*, *datafication* and *connectivity*. *Programmability* is understood as "the ability for a social media platform to trigger and steer users' creative or communicative contributions, while users, through their interaction with these coded environments, may in turn influence the flow of information and communication activated on such a platform" [5]. *Popularity* is characterized by both "algorithmic and socioeconomic components. Each platform has its distinct mechanism for boosting popularity of people, things, or ideas, which is measured mostly in quantified terms" [6]. Similarly, *datafication* is described as "the ability of networked platforms to render into data many aspects of the world that have never been quantified before" [7]. For our current purposes, we will mainly focus on *connectivity*, which is best covered by our survey data, while programmability, popularity, and datafication requires other data material to be examined.

Connectivity is described as the interplay between human agency and technology, and connectivity is particularly relevant in this context since we are interested in what affordances or possibilities for interaction the digital platforms allow, as well as how users actually utilize them. The definition of connectivity offered by Dijck and Poell suggests just such an interdependence of users and code: "connectivity refers to the socio-technical affordance of networked platforms to connect content to user activities and advertisers" where "the mutual shaping of users, platforms, advertisers and, more generally, online performative environments" is the driving mechanism [8]. Thus, the term is a combination of human connectedness (connection between humans) and automated connectivity (digital automatization and recommendations). This duality is also expressed through the very notion of the term platform, which Gillespie (2010) has described as a computational and architectural concept. Social media platforms represent possibilities but also limits for political interaction. These platforms steer users to specific behaviors, such as liking, commenting or sharing content. At the same time, users can impact Facebook's algorithm by selecting specific content for sharing, thus giving items more visibility in their network. In other words: "platforms shape the performances of social acts instead of merely facilitating them" [9]. Thus, the technology itself allows for some clearly defined types of interaction on each platform, but in a political context, "liking" and "sharing" might have different implications and connotations. The threshold for liking content may be lower compared to sharing content, as sharing content creates more visibility and attention in Facebook's newsfeed, and sharing political content may be sensitive in some cultures. In the following sections, the terms social media *platform* or *service* will be used interchangeably.

In the next section, we will map out the main affordances for political interaction among citizens and politicians on Facebook and Twitter.

Affordances for political interaction on Facebook and Twitter

While different from each other, Facebook and Twitter are both popular in our case country, but with different parts of the population. Facebook is the most popular of the two, with 64 percent of the population used the platform on a daily basis during 2014, the year of study (Statistisk sentralbyrå (SSB), 2014) [10]. Twitter use is small in comparison, with a mere eight percent daily use and a less representative user demographic. Specifically, Twitter users are characterized as young, urban males, as well as by societal elites, including journalists, politicians, and celebrities [11]. Activities undertaken on Facebook and Twitter create a trail of metadata, such as a number of likes, retweets or shares. In the present study, we argue that the social media logic of connectivity can be understood, in an operationalized sense, as practices of *Redistributing*, *Interacting* and *Acknowledging*. These affordances are outlined in [Figure 1](#).

	Twitter	Facebook
Acknowledging	Favorite	Like
Redistributing	Retweet	Share
Interacting	Mentions, @reply (Direct Message)	Comment (Chat)

Figure 1: Three types of “connective affordances” on Twitter and Facebook (build the work by Larsson, 2015).

First, while *Acknowledging* features such activities as liking a Facebook post or favorite, a tweet is frequently described along the lines of “slacktivism” (Morozov, 2011); the exact role of these measurements in deciding the political influence remains unclear. While sharing or retweeting posts and tweets is arguably more important for the coveted viral effects to occur, the tracking of likes and favorites is nevertheless of interest for our current purposes as it allows us to track the affordances at play.

Second, *Redistributing* addresses how users can utilize the share function on Facebook or the retweet function on Twitter to spread content to their network. While the relative public- or non-public character of the two platforms comes into play here, these redistributing functionalities are closely related to what is sometimes referred to as virality — defined as “the process which gives any information item (picture, video, text, or any other audio-visual-textual artifact) the maximum exposure, relative to the potential audience, over a short duration, distributed by many nodes” [12]. For political actors, this is arguably one of the most attractive functions of social media, as redistribution makes it possible to share political content outside their network of supporters — potentially to undecided voters (boyd, *et al.*, 2010; Klinger and Svensson, 2015). However, redistribution is not without risk for politicians, as users can add critical comments before sharing or retweeting the content.

Finally, *Interacting* has been pointed out as the defining character of the Internet, but uptake of such practices among politicians and parties has been mostly slow and hesitant (Stromer-Galley, 2014), indicative of the risk taken of exposure and embarrassment when interacting as a politician (Marcinkowski and Metag, 2014). Besides the options to interact publicly through mentions, @replies and comments, both platforms offer more private settings for interaction in the form of Twitter’s Direct Messages and

the Chat functionality available on Facebook. These are shown in parentheses in [Figure 1](#) in order to indicate their private nature.

In sum, then, our conceptual setup includes an operationalization of the connected affordances which we argue is an important element of the social media logic championed by Dijck and Poell. The subsequent section features an overview of the data collected and the analyses performed.

Method and data material

The study's data material is based on a survey, undertaken by the Norwegian branch of TNS Gallup, involving a nationally-representative sample of 1,057 Norwegians over the age of 18. The data collection was performed at the beginning of May 2014 and the selected respondents were part of an overarching Gallup Panel study [[13](#)].

The questions were of three main types. First, a series of socio-demographic items were included, previously pointed to as influential on various aspects of political activity. Specifically, variables gauging gender, age and education were employed as possible explanatory variables (*e.g.*, Larsson and Kalsnes, 2014). Second, our questions included an item detailing levels of political interest, commonly measured in studies of online political participation (*e.g.*, Boulianne, 2015; 2009). Third, a series of items designed to measure the degree to which the respondents had engaged with political actors on Facebook or Twitter, and conversely, if they had received any response by such actors on either of the two platforms. These questions were articulated based on the logic of connective affordances previously discussed. For example, we differentiated between "liking" or "favoriting" a post or tweet, between redistributing through sharing or retweeting, and, subsequently, also between more direct engagement — expressed here as commenting or contacting a political actor on one of the platforms under scrutiny. We use the term "political actor" throughout the study to denote individual politicians or political parties.

Results

As illustrated in [Table 1](#), connecting to political actors in this context is understood on Facebook as engaging as a *fan* or a *friend* (depending on the type of Facebook presence offered by the politician or party, such as profile, page or group) and on Twitter as the act of *following* political actors.

Table 1: 'Friending' and 'Following' practices of respondents in relation to political actors.		
	Facebook	Twitter
I follow/am 'friends' with/fan of a political actor on ...	29.9 (316)	11.2 (118)
I don't follow/am not a 'friend'/fan of a political actor on ...	67.8 (717)	79.4 (839)
Not sure	1.4 (15)	2.4 (25)
Response missing	.9 (9)	7.1 (75)
Total	100 (1,057)	100 (1,075)

The findings presented in Table 1 suggest that while 30 percent of respondents state that they are "fans" or "friends" of political actors on Facebook, 11 percent respond in a similar way when it comes to Twitter. In general, this would seem to reflect the general popularity in Norway of Facebook over Twitter.

Second, we turn to assessing some of the specific practices undertaken by the respondents in terms of contacting a political actor on Facebook and Twitter. In relation to this, we also look at the degree to which the respondents report having received a response from a political actor on either of these services. Both specified services are dealt with in turn, starting with Facebook. The figures report only responses by those respondents who stated that they were a 'friend' or 'fan' of a political actor on Facebook ($N=316$), or followed such an actor on Twitter ($N=118$).

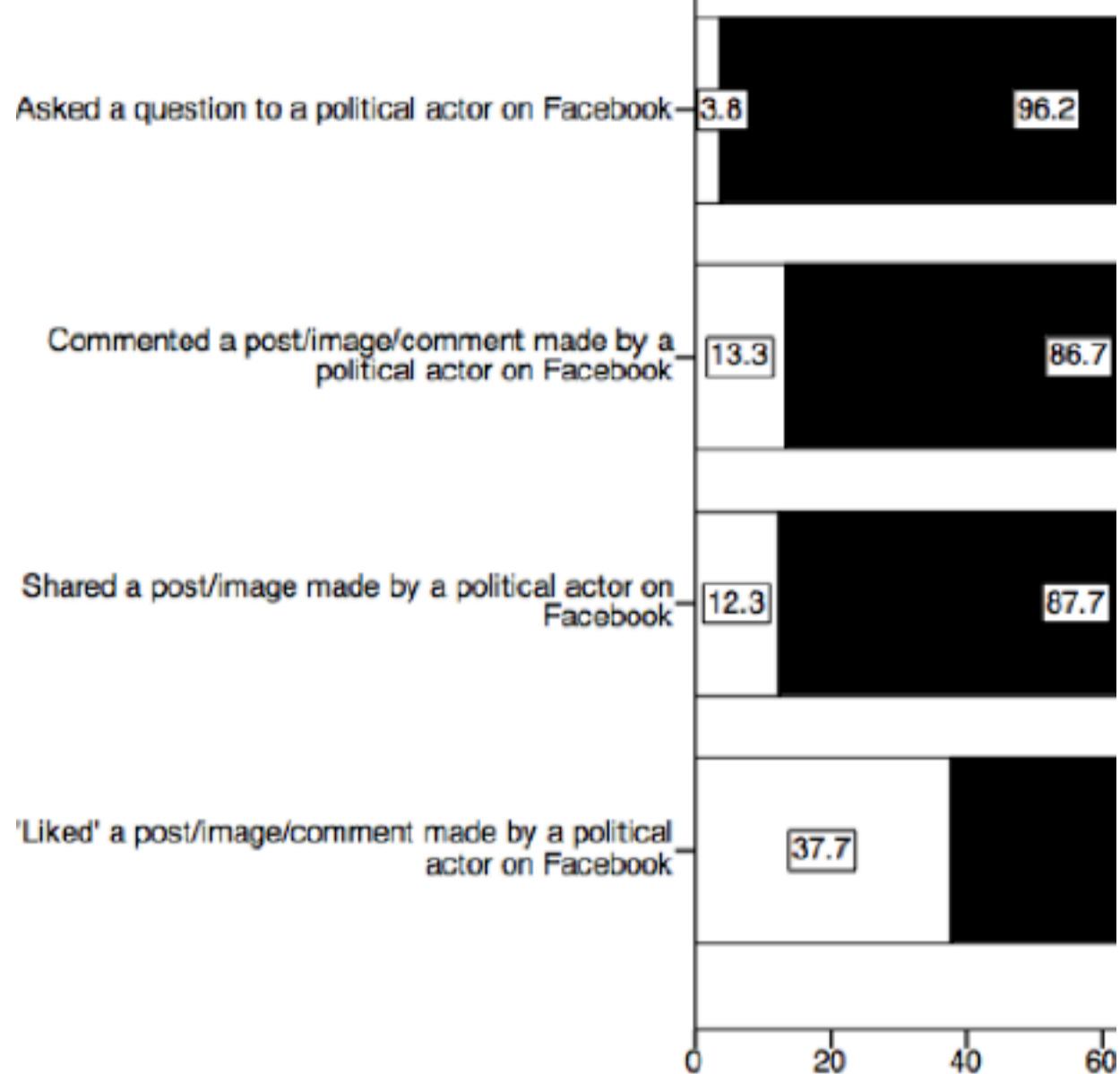


Figure 2: Respondents' Facebook activity in relation to political actors. Respondents 'friends' of political actors on Facebook. Black shades indicate negative response. $N=316$.

While the overall black shades found in Figure 2 suggests a rather passive stance on the part of the respondents, one of the practices presented in the figure stand out as comparably more common: the act of "liking" a post, image or comment made by a political actor had been undertaken by 37.7 percent ($N=119$) of the respondents. In relation to this, the act of sharing content provided by a politician or a political party was undertaken by 12.3 percent ($N=39$). While "likes" and "shares" can take on a variety of different social, and to some extent also technological connotations, they can be seen as easier to use as they allow for engaging on Facebook without necessarily posing questions to political actors or commenting on content made available by such groups. As posing a question or commenting on an update or image posted by a politician or a political party could be seen as more demanding forms of interaction, Figure 2 presents what could be described as political interaction with varying thresholds when it comes to engaging with political actors on Facebook. Nevertheless, the fact that 12.3 percent of the respondents had shared political content in this way could be seen as interesting from the perspective of "viral effects" as discussed previously. Sharing also gives respondents the opportunity to add their own comments to the content. Moreover, as 13.3 percent ($N=42$) of respondents had made more active efforts in terms of offering comments and 3.8 percent ($N=12$) had offered their own questions in this setting, the image of "slacktivism" (Morozov, 2011) emerges as more balanced — if ever so slightly.

As we move from Facebook to Twitter, the number of respondents who affirmed that they engaged in terms of following a politician or a political party diminishes. As such, our efforts are now focused on assessing the experiences submitted by those 118 respondents who reported to be followers of political actors on Twitter.

While sharing posts on Facebook was indeed a popular practice, the results presented in Figure 3 suggest a slightly different rationale for political Twitter use. The results presented for the retweet functionality indicate that this is the most common activity undertaken on Twitter (10.2 percent, $N=12$). By contrast, the acknowledging functionality of Twitter — marking tweets as "favorites" — is underutilized compared to Facebook. While posing questions to politicians or parties (4.2 percent, $N=5$) or commenting on tweets made by such actors (5.1 percent, $N=6$) are comparably uncommon practices here, the fact that the utilization of retweets — potentially allowing content to reach the coveted viral status — points to an

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Citizens' response from political actors in social media

Regarding the respondents' perceived responses from political actors, [Figure 3](#) similarly suggests the most common practices to be that of acknowledging the effort made — understood here as “liking.”

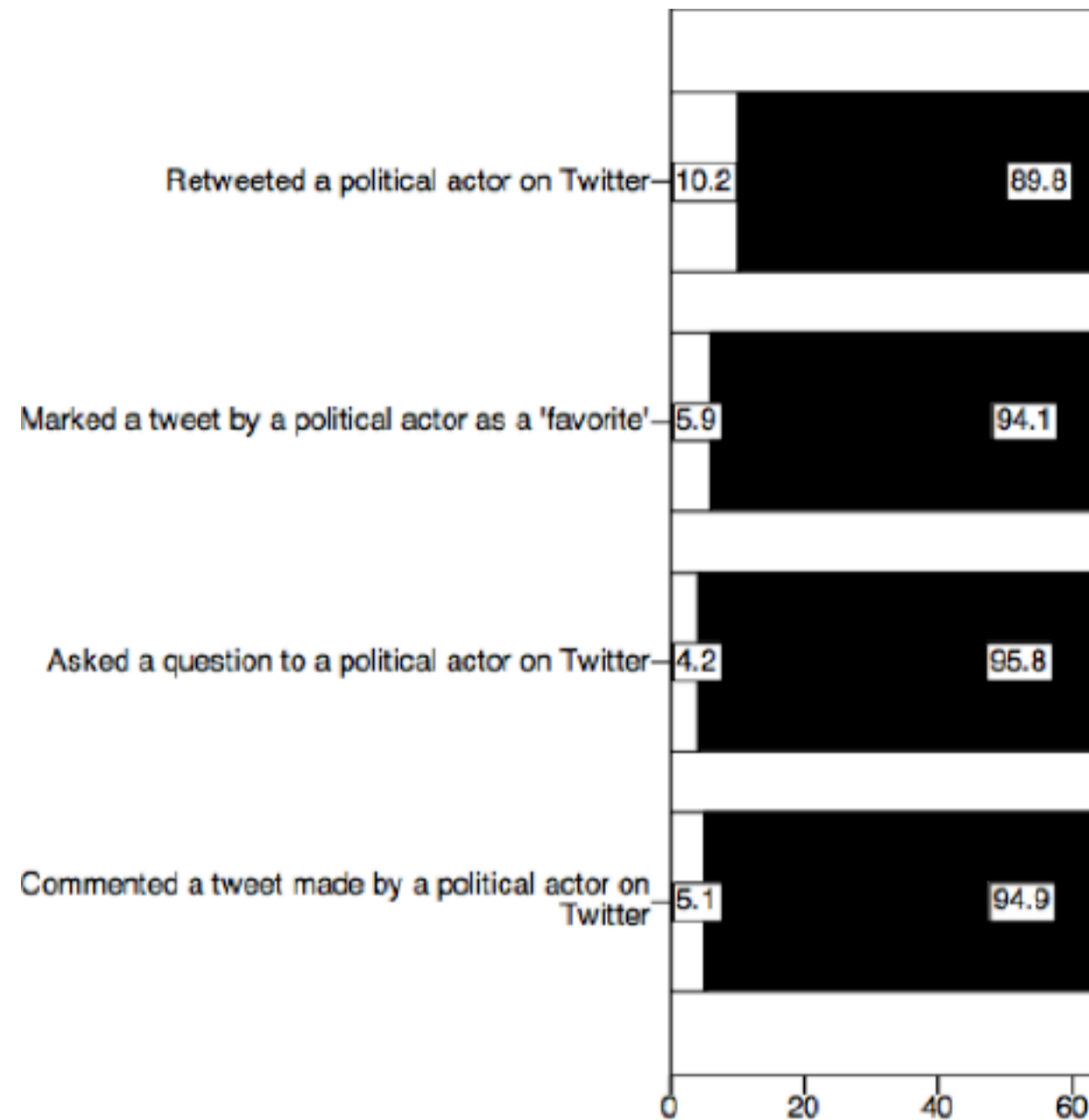


Figure 3: Respondents' Twitter activity in relation to political actors. Respondents of political actors on Facebook. Black shades indicate negative response. Percent

Indeed, 28.2 percent ($N=89$) had this experience during the last four-week period, while 22.4 percent ($N=71$) indicated that content they had provided had been commented on by a political actor. Finally, Figure 3 suggests that political actors rarely choose to “share” content from the respondents (12.2 percent, $N=38$), a finding suggestive of the need for politicians and parties to remain in control of what is being posted, said or otherwise provided in relation to their online presences (*e.g.*, Foot and Schneider, 2006).

Unexpectedly, the results detailing the degrees to which respondents had been approached by political actors on Twitter all emerge at similar levels. Indeed, similar numbers of the respondents reported that their tweets had been retweeted or marked as “favorites” by political actors, or that they had been contacted by political actors on Twitter. While these statistics can in some ways be seen as diminutive compared to experiences reported from Facebook (see Figure 4), Twitter users report having their content on the platform redistributed by political actors more often (20 percent, $N=25$) than for the comparable measure for Facebook (12.2 percent, $N=38$). As such, politicians appear relatively more willing to retweet than to share — a cautious interpretation that could have to do with the aforementioned “elite” characteristic often ascribed to Twitter in the Norwegian context. As politicians supposedly engage with other elites on Twitter, it makes sense for them to “rub shoulders” or acknowledge each other in these ways.

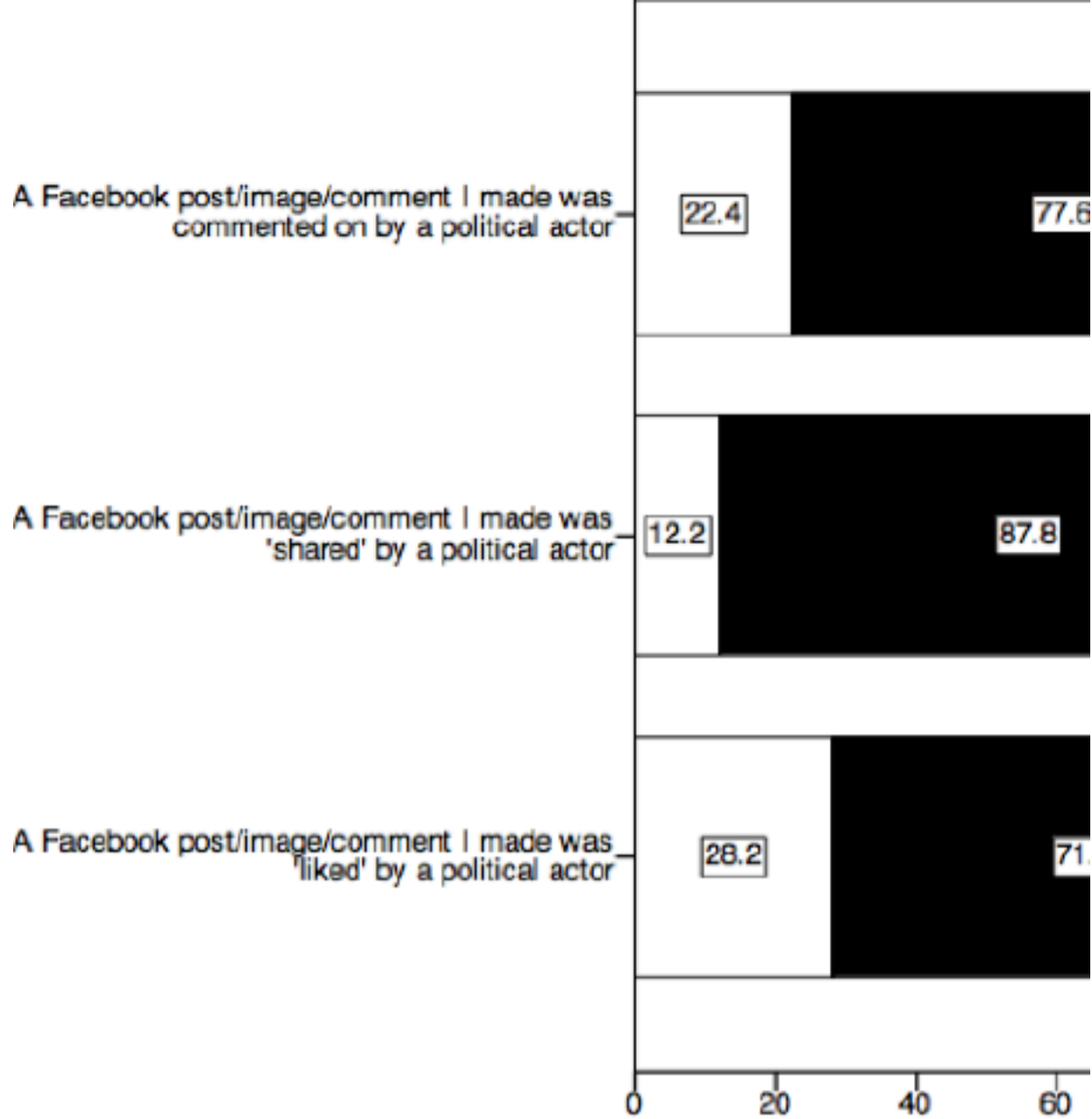


Figure 4: Respondents' perceived responses from political actors on Facebook. Respondents are 'fans' or 'friends' of political actors on Facebook. Black shades indicate negative responses reported, $N=316$.

With these findings and tentative interpretations in mind, we move on to attempt to assess how respondent characteristics appear to have effects on their own activities, as well as the types of feedback they receive from political actors as detailed above. First, [Table 2](#) presents results as related specifically to Facebook.

Table 2: Logistic regression — drivers of political activity on Facebook.						
Notes: Standardized coefficients reported. *** = $p < .001$, ** = $p < .01$, * = $p < .05$.						
	I have engaged with political actors on Facebook			I have received feedback by political actors on Facebook		
	Like	Share	Comment	Receive like	Receive share	Receive comment
Political interest 1-5 Likert scale where 1="Little interest" and 5="Large interest"	.53***	.64**	1.03***	.36	.61	.76*
Gender 1=Male, 2=Female	-.32	.17	-.31	.35	.28	.61
Education 1-5 Likert scale where 1=Basic education	-.25*	-.27	-.30*	-.17	-.18	-.08

only and 5=Extensive university education						
Age	-.02**	-.01	.14*	.02	.03	.04*
Cox-Snell R ²	.03	.02	.12	.04	.06	.12
Nagelkerke R ²	.06	.05	.21	.07	.10	.18

Table 2 presents a series of logistic regressions tracing the influence of our independent variables on the various connective affordances we enquired about. The dependent variables — whether a respondent reported to have liked, shared or commented on a post by a political actor, or had received a like, share or comment from a politician or a political party — are understood here as dichotomies, as they were based on yes or no questions.

As was expected, the influence of political interest on political engagement is very clear from the results presented in Table 2. This holds especially true for the engagements undertaken by the respondents themselves. Interestingly, those individuals with higher levels of political interest also report being recipients of comments from political actors to a higher degree. While it is difficult to draw any firm conclusions, this result could point to a “rich-get-richer” type effect where those already involved in public affairs increase their political capital in this regard by engaging — and by being engaged by — those endowed with political power.

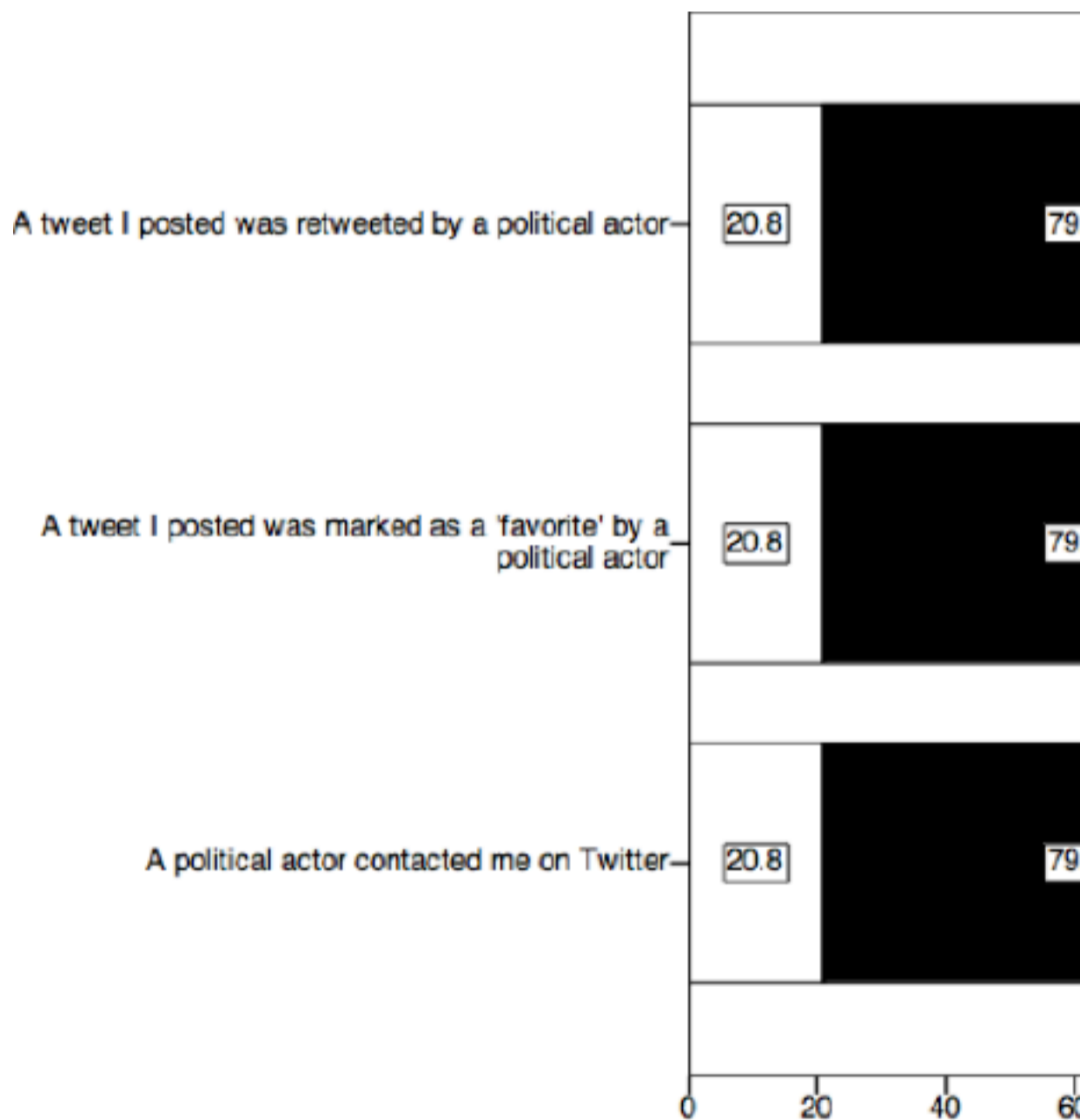


Figure 5: Respondents' perceived responses from political actors on Twitter. Respondents who are 'followers' of political actors on Twitter. Black shades indicate negative response. N=118.

Second, the supposed influence of gender on activities like these is difficult to assess. Nevertheless, it has been suggested that gendered differences are at play when we take to the Internet — in general terms as well as for various political purposes (e.g., Hargittai and Litt, 2012; Jones, et al., 2009). However, the results presented in Table 2 suggest that the effect of gender emerges as being non-significant throughout.

Third, the variable gauging respondent education shows significant and negative effects with regards to respondents liking and commenting on the Facebook presences of political actors. This suggests that such activities tend to be undertaken by those with comparably lower education. This is a result that speaks to the claims discussed previously that social media could serve as means of contact with political actors for those who otherwise do not enjoy such opportunities to communicate. However, as far as the results regarding the education variable in relation to feedback received by the respondents were concerned, no significant results were reached. This suggests that, while those respondents with lower education might be comparably more active in contacting political actors, there appears to be little reciprocity.

Interestingly, the age variable provides mixed results. While a lower age emerges as a significant predictor for acknowledging — using the “like” functionality on Facebook — the findings presented in Table 2 also suggest that comparably older respondents are more active when it comes to commenting as well as receiving comments on the platform — suggesting the contours of a more reciprocal approach than the one identified for the education variable.

Next, [Table 3](#) makes use of the same independent variables as featured previously to analyze tendencies of political engagement on Twitter.

Table 3: Logistic regression — drivers of political activity on Twitter. Notes: Standardized coefficients reported. *** = $p < .001$, ** = $p < .01$, * = $p < .05$.						
	I have engaged with political actors on Twitter ...			I have received feedback by political actors on Twitter ...		
	Favorite	Retweet	Asked question	Receive favorite	Receive retweet	Receive comment
Political interest 1–5 Likert scale where 1=“Little interest” and 5=“Large interest”	.99*	1.01*	.71	-.54	.35	.97
Gender 1=Male, 2=Female	.69	-.04	2.02*	1.65	-.12	.93
Education 1–5 Likert scale where 1=Basic education only and 5=Extensive university education	-.75	-.17	1.33**	-.39	.30	.28
Age	-.02**	-.01	.14*	.02	.03	.04*
Cox-Snell R ²	.03	.02	.12	.04	.06	.12
Nagelkerke R ²	.06	.05	.21	.07	.10	.18

Much like the Facebook activity gauged in [Table 2](#), the results detailing the influences of political interest also emerge as significant for Twitter use — although not to the same extent. Second, for gender, we again see a difference for Twitter when compared to the results emanating from the Facebook data, though this is true for only one form of engagement — having asked a question on Twitter, which is more common among women. Third, while the variable for education emerged as significant and negative for Facebook use, the effect found here is a positive one, suggesting that (at least for the “Asked question” measure), respondents with higher education were more active in this regard. Fourth, for respondent age, [Table 3](#) again provides a contrasting view when compared to the results presented in Table 2. Where the former suggested that Facebook users who engaged in commenting tended to be comparably older, the latter shows

that the opposite tendency to be more typical for Twitter: the younger are more active in commenting.

Discussion and conclusion

Based on the theory of social media logic and our model of connective affordances, this study had three initial research questions: First; how many citizens connect and interact with political actors in social media; second, which affordances are most used in the interaction between citizens and political actors; and third, the apparent effect of demographic variables on political activity in social media. This final section of the paper provides a discussion of the results.

For the first research question, we found a surprising increase in the numbers of citizens “friending” and “following,” thus networking with politicians, particularly on Facebook. A Norwegian survey from 2011 and 2012 found that 15 percent and 17 percent of Internet users followed or were friends of political actors on Facebook or Twitter [14]. To compare these numbers to more traditional political participation measurements, five percent of Norwegian voters (citizens 18 years and older) are members of a political party (van Biezen, *et al.*, 2012). Our results indicate an increase in this particular type of political engagement among citizens and politicians on Facebook, a platform that is typically dominated by personal interactions. In relation to the results reported here, it might be suitable to ask how common these types of behavior are in other countries. While 30 percent [15] or 1.46 million Norwegians are following political actors on Facebook, few comparative studies exist — and the studies that are available utilize different methods, phrasing of questions, and so on, making exact comparison difficult. Nevertheless, we would still argue that the results from previous studies reported below tell us something about the scope of connections among citizens and political actors in social media. For instance, a survey in Denmark found that 15 percent of the Internet population follow a politician or political party on Facebook or Twitter [16]. Among social media users in the U.K. and U.S., respectively 18 percent and 23 percent follow a politician, 17 percent and 19 percent follow a political party and 17 percent and 14 percent follow a campaign group [17]. Thus, connecting political actors in social media is a more common online behavior in Norway than in Denmark, the U.K. and U.S. This is an advantage for political actors who, according to social media logic, will build a network to reach as many potential voters as possible. It also indicates that, even though social media platforms allow for connection and interaction, citizens may sustain from connecting with political actors; for example, due to political culture, popularity of political actors or users’ attitude to expressing political views online. Our data does not reveal which political actors citizens are following, so we are not able to verify or modify the findings identified by Nielsen and Vaccari (2013), who found that voters mainly follow some selected high-profiled political actor, while the majority of candidates were largely ignored by the electorate. Such a more detailed approach, then, could be a suitable task for future research projects.

Second, regarding which connective affordances are most used between citizens and political actors, “**Acknowledging**” (likes/favorites) on Facebook is clearly most used, both among citizens (37.7 percent) and politicians (28.2 percent). A *like* can be understood as a social media affordance that allows for low-threshold political interaction. Such activities have also been described as slacktivism or clicktivism: political participation with limited or no political implications (Morozov, 2011). However, the unpredictable nature of online interactions makes it difficult to predict whether or what impact a *like* actually has (Carr, 2012). As the number of *likes* is part of Facebook’s algorithm that decides what content figures “on top” in Facebook’s newsfeed (Bucher, 2012), a *like* is also an important component of Facebook’s distribution mechanism. In terms of social media logic, encouraging *likes* and *shares* is important to create viral effects: massive distribution in a short time. Twitter’s *favorite* feature has not (yet) become a strong mechanism within social media logic compared to likes, thus it can be argued that this behavior is not so heavily encouraged among users. Additionally, the *favorite* feature on Twitter is more concealed compared to the *like* button featured on Facebook, and it can be argued that the affordance for “acknowledging” is more visible on Facebook than on Twitter.

In relation to “**Redistributing**” (share/retweet), 12.2 percent of respondents had shared political actors’ updates on Facebook and 12.3 percent had received *shares* from political actors. Among the connective affordances on Twitter, *retweet* is most frequently used, 10.2 percent had *retweeted* political actors on Twitter and 20.8 percent had received *retweets* from political actors. Receiving and providing political shares is not as easily done as *likes*, as we discussed earlier. Within social media logic, shares and retweets are important features of viral effects, but the visibility that shares generate can also make some users sensitive, due to their own online persona.

Most surprising for us are the findings related to “**Interacting**”

(comments/mentions/replies). More respondents reported having interacted with politicians through *comments* (Facebook) or *mentions* (Twitter) compared to the share of respondents who said they had interacted with comments on political actors' social media profiles (22.4 percent vs. 13.3 percent). This is a somewhat surprising finding compared to earlier research on low interactivity from political actors due to the time, resources, and potential reputation risks (Enli and Skogerbø, 2013; Stromer-Galley, 2014). Citizens apparently receive more interaction from political actors than they contribute themselves. This difference is particularly acute on Twitter, where the difference amounts to 15 percentage points. Explanations for this surprising finding are not evident; not when it comes to how the panel has been recruited (regular Gallup Panel study, not self-recruited), and we have no indication that the respondents are more politically interested than normal. The elite profile of Twitter users could be one reason why it is more attractive for politicians to interact with them. But we must keep in mind that these results are based on self-reported data, which might not be completely accurate due to — among other things — social desirability bias. In sum, we have no indication that the respondent sample would be skewed towards a specific disposition when it comes to political activity in this regard. Nevertheless, the fairly high level of responsiveness from political actors is interesting and surprising. According to social media logic, interacting through comments and mentions can be a way for politicians to build a network with sympathizers and potential voters, and, according to our data, this seems to be a social media affordance political actors adhere to.


Third, turning to our socio-demographic predictors, political interest did indeed emerge as a forecaster for political connectivity in social media (Boulianne, 2015). Our results further suggest that the stronger the political interest the citizens express, the greater the use of such connective affordances as commenting and sharing. While political interest successfully predicted four aspects of engagement on Facebook, only two aspects of Twitter use — using favorites and retweets in relation to political actors — are related in this way to heightened levels of political interest. This difference might relate to the different demographic populations of the two platforms, Facebook is used by “everyone” while Twitter is mainly used by urban, highly-educated elites in Norway (Enjolras, *et al.*, 2013). Acknowledging and redistributing through favorites and retweets on Twitter are the most common activities, and it could indicate that Twitter users in general are more politically interested. Additionally, the citizens with the strongest political interest also received more responses from political actors, such as comments. This is the case on Facebook and to a certain degree on Twitter. Politically engaged and interested Facebook users are more active social media users, thus attracting more attention from politicians than users who interact less.

Gender, on the other hand, only explains one form of engagement: asking questions on Twitter. It suggests that some gendered differences could still be at play when one seeks to understand political social media use. Demographic differences on Facebook and Twitter are also found in relation to education: those with lower education are more active on Facebook, while those with higher education are more active on Twitter, particularly in asking questions, which clearly reflects back to the demographic characteristics of the two social media platforms — Twitter use is largely associated with urban, highly-educated elites (Enjolras, *et al.*, 2013). Similarly, age is a predictor for activity, in the sense that younger people are more active than older, particularly in regard to *liking* on Facebook, as well as all afforded connections on Twitter. Nevertheless, older citizens receive more responses from political actors on Facebook, while the opposite is the case on Twitter. Indeed, for all three variables detailing the various types of connective options available for respondents, age emerges as a significant, negative predictor. Thus, according to our study, the level of political interest is the strongest predictor for who connects with political actors on social media. Political interest also impacts what response citizens receive from political actors in social media.

While this study has provided important and theoretically-grounded empirical insights into the political uses of social media, it has limitations that should be duly noted. First, the data employed are self-reported, as already mentioned — a sampling technique that carries with it some restraints regarding what respondents claim about their experiences online and what their actual experiences are. Thus, a study design employing user data from a series of respondents could prove a suitable complement to the approach favored here, although such a suggested methodological advance would be complicated from the perspective of research ethics (Zimmer, 2010). Second, while the functional definitions of a share, a like or a retweet might be reasonably clear, the end-user perspective remains largely inaccessible through the approach favored here. As pointed out by Lomborg and Bechmann, these types of data “say very little about the meanings that users ascribe to their social media use” [18]. With this in mind, future research efforts on the political uses of social media might find it useful to build on the findings presented in the current paper in order to delve deeper into the meanings associated with these communicative processes. Third, for Tables 2 and 3, it is worth noticing that while our independent variables did succeed in providing some knowledge on the degree to which our respondents had received feedback from politicians on Facebook, the

same could not be said for Twitter. This could be due to the low percentage of respondents reporting that they actually use Twitter — although we cannot be sure. Future research might be able to combine different types of methods to reach greater insights into these mechanisms — perhaps taking the findings presented here as a starting point of sorts.

With these findings in mind, one might ask what the role of social media for communication between citizens and politicians is — and, realistically, what it has the potential to become. A recent study of the Norwegian population found 70 percent of those who follow politicians on social media also take on roles as opinion leaders in various contexts — meaning that they already are more engaged in politics than average citizens (Karlsen, 2015). Following from this, one could argue that political interactions in social media — low-threshold activities such as likes, shares and retweets — have not become a widespread activity. Rather, interactions with politicians in social media seems to be a limited phenomenon, with an overweight of already politically-engaged citizens. Despite the apparent increase of political interaction on social media in Norway, nearly 70 percent of our respondents indicated that they were not “fans” of Facebook pages operated by political actors, with statistic for Twitter reaching close to 80 percent. While we cannot make any statement about it here, the potential network effect that social media allows for needs to be taken into account — essentially, the spread of content to users who initially do not follow or interact with politicians, but receive political content indirectly via opinion makers who like, share or retweet. It is outside the scope of this paper to examine the network effects, but future studies should take this aspect into consideration since distribution via social networks is one of the main means young people receive news, including in Norway (MediaNorway, 2014).

To sum up, the results presented here suggest that the popularity of Facebook among Norwegians could be seen as allowing for a new way of contact between citizens and political actors without the mass media as mediator. Facebook is a service where “ordinary” people engage in political interaction with political actors, while Twitter is mostly used by a small group of the population for these purposes. By applying the theory of social media logic, we were able to identify which connective affordances were used most among citizens and political actors. To give a *like* is the most utilized social media affordance, both among citizens and political actors, thus a *like* functions as a common low-threshold activity for political interaction. Not so surprisingly, the level of political interest is the strongest predictor for who connects with political actors on social media. But, rather surprisingly, we find that citizens report that they receive more comments from political actors than they contribute themselves. Lastly, our study showed political interest impacts what response citizens receive from political actors in social media. Ideas for future research could be to conduct a historical comparison of online connectivity between citizens and politician, and compare today’s situation with initiatives in the 1990s to engage citizens on Web sites or by including other types of social media (e.g., vibrant platforms such as Reddit, which is famous for AMAs with politicians). 

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Notes

- [1.](#) Nielsen and Vaccari, 2013, p. 2,335.
- [2.](#) Altheide and Snow, 1979, p. 11.
- [3.](#) Klinger and Svensson, 2015, pp. 1,244–1,245.
- [4.](#) Strömbäck and Esser, 2009, p. 220.
- [5.](#) Dijck and Poell, 2013, p. 5.
- [6.](#) Dijck and Poell, 2013, p. 7.
- [7.](#) Dijck and Poell, 2013, p. 10.
- [8.](#) Dijck and Poell, 2013, p. 8.

9. Dijck, 2013, p. 29.

10. In 2016, 67 percent of Norwegians used Facebook daily, and among the youngest, those below 30 years, 88 percent used Facebook daily, according to TNS Gallup <http://www.tns-gallup.no/kantar-tns-innsikt/facebook-henger-med-mens-snapchat-vokser-raskt-viser-social-media-tracker/>.

11. Enjolras, *et al.*, 2013, pp. 47–48.

12. Nahon, *et al.*, 2011, p. 1.

13. Except for the questions we included about political social media use among citizens, we were not able to impact the variables included in the Gallup survey. This limited the variables we could include in the study, however, as previous studies have shown that our variables (gender, age, education, political interest) are among the most central variables when studying political interest use.

14. Enjolras, *et al.*, 2013, p. 155. We are aware that there are some slight differences in the wording in the questions. Nevertheless, the historic data give use some indications of developments within this field.

15. Thirty percent of the Internet population, and the Internet population consist of 96 percent of the Norwegian population (5.1 mill), which constitute 1.46 million Norwegians (MediaNorway, 2014).

16. Nielsen and Schröder, 2014, p. 28.

17. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. University of Oxford, 2015, p. 82.

18. Lomborg and Bechmann, 2014, p. 260.

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