Genres of political communication in Web 2.0

Helmut Gruber

Introduction: the affordances of Web 2.0 social-media platforms for political communication

The internet and its different forms of communication (as many previous technological innovations) has been hailed as providing enhanced opportunities for reshaping political communication by some authors, whereas others have been less optimistic (Larsson 2013). This chapter reviews research on social-media platforms’ affordances for the key ‘players’ of political communication (politicians, citizens) and how these players use social media when they engage in political communication. It will then try to provide a preliminary answer to the question that underlies the two positions sketched here, namely, whether or not social media provide participants of political communication with qualitatively new communicative possibilities. For this reason (and because of the limited space available for this literature overview), studies that use social-media texts from other contexts (such as media discussion boards) in order to investigate ‘traditional’ topics of critical discourse scholarship such as racist communication (e.g. Dorostkar & Preisinger 2012; Angouri & Wodak 2014), or (social) identity issues (KhosraviNik & Zia 2014; KhosraviNik 2014; Barton & Lee 2013) will not be considered here.

Internet communication tools (ICTs) did not become ubiquitous before the advent of the World Wide Web in the early 90s. The early websites (static personal or commercial websites, or frequently-asked-question lists, FAQs) became more dynamic and interactive in the late 1990s with the inclusion of discussion boards and other tools facilitating user interaction with website owners. Around this time, blogs became the heralds of what was later called Web 2.0 forms of communications as they facilitate frequent updating and easy interaction between bloggers and their audiences (Herring 2013; Miller & Shepherd 2004). Although not uncontroversial, the term ‘Web 2.0’ is widely used for all internet applications that allow users the easy creation and sharing of various contents (text messages, photos, music, videos, etc.) and enable them to engage in co-operative activities (such as blogging, contributing to wikis and tagging content with individually chosen tags; see Herring 2013).

The new communication technologies’ constraining – as well as enabling – factors have been termed their ‘affordances’ by Hutchby (2001), utilising a concept introduced by...
Political communication in Web 2.0

cognitive psychologist James J Gibson in the late 1970s. Social-media platforms’ affordances cannot be assessed independently from their different groups of users as well as from the hardware devices on which they run; for example, the use of social media for organising protest movements was only made possible by the availability of mobile devices on which activists could use these media on-site. The devices and the software running on them thus represent network agents in the sense of Latour’s actor-network theory (see Bennett & Segerberg 2012) that actively change (and enhance) human users’ social, semiotic and cognitive capabilities. Viewing social media platforms (used on various devices) in terms of their affordances allows a differentiated assessment of the communicative practices they offer for different user groups and facilitates establishing connections between political scientists’ conceptions of collective vs. connective actions (Bennett & Segerberg 2012), specific social media technologies and the genres different user groups realise when using them.

Social-media platforms not only provide affordances for users, but also for the companies that own them and for those who are in control of internet connections: many social-media applications are free for users, but this monetary advantage comes at the price of users’ content being constantly monitored by the respective companies in order to provide custom-tailored advertising. Furthermore, various state authorities may also monitor (and in special cases, shut down) internet connections in order to identify users producing content that is not in the respective authorities’ interest, or in order to prevent citizens from engaging in connective actions (as incidents in countries such as China, Iran, but also in the UK, have shown, see, e.g. Earl et al. 2013). Social media thus provide simultaneously affordances for business companies and state authorities as well as for different user groups and their communicative needs. This chapter will try to consider all these different aspects when providing an overview on the research literature on genres of political communication in Web 2.0.

The remainder of this chapter is organised as follows: first, the most relevant linguistic concepts used in this chapter will be introduced, and then, different areas of political communication and the use of social-media genres in them will be discussed. The internal division of this section (pp. 414–421, politician-to-citizen communication, citizen-to-citizen communication) roughly follows Bennet & Segerberg’s (2012) differentiation between collective and connective action networks. The last section provides an outlook on promising lines for further inquiries.

Relevant genre theoretic concepts

Under a linguistic perspective, genres are abstractions derived from the analysis of texts (i.e. functional communicative units realised mono- or multimodally; Gruber 2008) which are used in a certain type of communicative situation for achieving the same communicative purpose(s). Most current genre theories agree that genres are internally structured, typified forms of purposive social semiotic action used and recognised by members of ‘communities of practice’ (Lave & Wenger 1991), and emerging as situated rhetorical responses to recurring communicative ‘challenges’ (for an overview of recent genre theories, see Mäntynen & Shore 2014; Gruber 2013, pp. 31–39). This view entails that genres are conceptualised at the level of context-sensitive social practices, taking into consideration producer and audience positions (and positioning), social purposes, and semiotic modes of their production. Genres are often related to certain discourses (‘particular way[s] of constructing a subject matter’ Fairclough 1993, p. 128), and are realised through specific registers (situation-adequate semiotic resources for realising a genre; see Gruber 2013,
p. 38). Genre theories differ, however, in the relevance they assign to either their structural ('intrinsic') or their social activity related ('extrinsic') aspects (Kwaśnik & Crowston 2005; Gruber 2013). For analysing genres in the new media, an activity-orientated approach is better suited as it allows a focus on what people are doing with a genre across media and communication platforms. In Web 2.0 communication applications, traditional genres may be (a) simply reproduced on the Web (Askehave & Nielsen 2005; Kwaśnik & Crowston 2005), or they may be (b) adapted (i.e. new media-specific features may be added), or (c) new media-specific genres may emerge (Crowston & Williams 2000).

The concept of recontextualisation (van Leeuwen 2008) provides the appropriate theoretical tool for investigating the effects of ‘genre travels’ from one (media) context to another. It allows analysis of the effects of taking social action units (e.g. genres) out of their original context (in which they emerged) and putting them into a new context. Using a genre in a new context entails the loss of some original features, whereas others (and their semiotic meanings) are transferred into the new context where new, context-specific meaning aspects may be added. Recontextualisation of social practices thus always involves both semiotic loss and semiotic enrichment.

For the investigation of Web 2.0 genres in general, the above considerations show that investigators would be better not focusing on genres in a single context, but on their travel across various media and communication platforms and the recontextualisation effects of this travel. For scholars of political communication in Web 2.0 in particular, the corollary is that the use of traditional genres of political communication in new media environments deserves the same attention as the emergence of new genres that are facilitated through the affordances of social media for certain user groups.

**Domains of political Web 2.0 communication**

Most studies of the use of social media in political communication so far have not been conducted within an explicitly linguistic, discourse-analytic or pragmatic framework, but rather, in the fields of political science and communication studies. The activity-orientated genre conception proposed above, however, enables us to discuss the results of many of these studies under a genre perspective.

The following section is divided into two parts. The first part deals with politicians’ and political parties’ use of social media in their communication with the public; the second part focuses on citizens’ use of social media in political activities.

**Politician-to-citizen communication: political campaigning revisited**

In political science, the use of Web 2.0 communication tools in politician–citizen communication has been studied almost exclusively in the context of Western liberal democracies. Two complementary assumptions have provided the general framework for these investigations (Larsson 2013): the innovation and the normalisation hypothesis. Whereas the innovation hypothesis assumes that the internet (and especially Web 2.0 technologies) will enhance politicians’ possibilities for disseminating information and establishing and maintaining contact with their voters, the normalisation hypothesis expects that offline organisational and political structures will also shape political-communication structures on the internet; in other words, that politicians’ use of new information and communication technologies will amount to ‘more of the same’ rather than result in genuinely new and (in whatever sense) ‘better’ communication with their audience.
Larsson’s (2013) literature review shows that far more studies seem to support the normalisation hypothesis, and that innovative uses of both Web 1.0 and 2.0 communication tools by politicians seem to be the exception. The reviewed studies show, however, quite marked geographical differences regarding the use of ICTs. In the US political system, the internet has been used for more than a decade, though for rather traditional communicative goals such as targeting supporters and activists, rather than persuading undecided voters (Vaccari 2008a). The 2008 Obama election campaign that has become internationally famous for its use of internet communication technologies (albeit rather ‘traditional’ ones such as email field reports for volunteers and journalists, see Chadwick 2013, p. 133) thus marks only the tip of an iceberg of ICT use by US politicians.

In Europe, a north–south divide has been reported insofar as politicians in Northern European countries (including the UK and Germany) tend to use ICTs more often (although not extensively) than politicians in Southern Europe (including France; Larsson 2013). Similar to the US case, the use of traditional web techniques (such as web sites and email) seems to be more frequent than the adoption of Web 2.0 communication technologies. This communication style has been coined ‘Web 1.5’ use by Jackson and Lilleker (2009). Studies show that audience characteristics (i.e. the ‘consumer side’ of politician–citizen communication) also support the normalisation hypothesis as mainly (younger) people (in the US and in Europe) who are engaged in offline political activities use the internet for acquiring additional political information (Larsson 2013).

The obvious support of the normalisation hypothesis of Larsson’s (2013) review underpins Bennett and Segerberg’s (2012) distinction between ‘collective’ and ‘connective’ action logics. The former refers to conventional collective actions that are based on overarching social characteristics (e.g. class, gender, race, etc.), and organised by traditional membership-based institutions. The latter are issue-based and rely on similar individual disaffections, rather than on shared collective characteristics (see p. 418). The extensive verification of the normalisation hypothesis thus suggests that traditional political organisations (and actors), following a collective action logic, will display traditional communication behaviour in Web 2.0.

The studies on the overall use of ICTs by politicians leave questions open, such as whether there are differences regarding the communication tools used, the characteristics of politicians who use ICTs, and the communicative goals for which they are used. Concerning the first question, Larsson found in a series of studies, that (at least Swedish and Norwegian) politicians use micro-blogging (i.e. Twitter) more often than Facebook. This result is in line with investigations in other countries showing that Twitter is a communication platform that is mainly used by elites (Ausserhofer & Maireder 2013; Larsson & Moe 2012), where the term ‘elites’ may refer to rather different groups such as politicians, journalists, celebrities, and so on. Social network analyses show that although ordinary users often contribute most messages to Twitter interactions, politicians (and journalists) tend to be the centres (nodes) of Twitter communication networks (Ausserhofer & Maireder 2013; Larsson 2014). Regarding politicians’ use of Twitter messages, Jackson and Lilleker (2011) found that those few (i.e. 7.9 per cent, Jackson & Lilleker 2011, p. 94) UK politicians who use Twitter (in 2007) at all are mostly younger (35–54), female MPs from the three largest parties, and most of their messages are clearly aimed at personal impression management.

Rather different sender characteristics were found in a study that compiled Twitter data from Members of the European parliament (MEPs) in 2013 (Larsson 2013). Although this study also found younger politicians using Twitter more often than older ones, the gender variable was not relevant here. Rather, MEPs who were integrated into denser Twitter
networks (i.e. who had more followers, but also followed others) tended to be more active than others. Furthermore, the study did not support previous claims that politicians from established democracies would make more use of Web 2.0 communication facilities than those from younger democracies. Larsson (2013) concludes that (at least with regard to Twitter use) younger, ‘innovative’ politicians from all European countries who are well integrated in internet communication networks use Twitter as a means for communication with those members of their electorate who share these characteristics (i.e. being young, ardent users of Web 2.0 ICTs) with them. A further study focusing on Norway and Sweden showed that politicians who are not in central, but rather, at mid-level positions in their respective parties, tend to be the most active Twitter users (Larsson & Kalsnes 2014).

Most of the studies reported here (except Jackson & Lilleker 2011) investigated politicians’ use of Twitter on the level of network integration and activity, that is, they did not explore the content of the messages and/or the activities they performed and thus leave the question open as to which genres are used in politicians’ Twitter use.

Whereas politicians’ Twitter use has received some scholarly attention (albeit mainly on the ‘macro’- level described above), the use of Facebook by politicians has been rarely studied. In a study of US congressional candidates’ use of Facebook during the 2006 and 2008 elections, Williams & Gulati (2013) conducted a content analysis of politicians’ Facebook pages. Results show a major increase in politicians’ use of Facebook during the investigated period (from about 16% use in 2006 to 72% in 2008). Furthermore, their results reveal that Democrats used this social network more than Republicans, and that challengers and candidates in competitive district races with a more highly educated electorate used Facebook earlier than others did. Early adoption, however, did not correlate with frequency of use (i.e. updating), which means that whereas challengers tend to be early adopters of social media in political campaigning, incumbents (who have more organisational and financial support) use them more often and more professionally.

In a comparative study, Larsson and Kalsness (2014) studied the use of Twitter (see above) and Facebook by Swedish and Norwegian politicians during their routine political activities. Their study also found that politicians in challenger positions used both services more often than incumbents. In an additional investigation, Larsson (2014) compared the Facebook use of Swedish and Norwegian politicians during elections. He found that politicians of marginalised (i.e. either small or politically isolated) parties and less-known politicians tended to use this social-media platform more often than politicians of big parties (probably to overcome a media bias that privileges central political actors). Their postings were also more often liked and shared by users, which Larsson interprets as a kind of audience’s mirroring politicians’ heavier use of the media platform.

Similar to the Twitter studies discussed above, the few investigations of politicians’ use of Facebook provide only limited information on the activities (and hence genres) for which politicians use this social-media platform.

Websites (of both political parties and single politicians), although at first glance typical ‘Web 1.0’ forms of communication, increasingly include interactive elements (such as discussion boards, chat facilities, links to social media, etc.) and have been studied under a perspective that allows an interpretation of their results in terms of genre use. The applied framework (see Foot & Schneider 2006) provides a broad classification of the communicative activities a website allows: ‘information’ comprises all traditional communicative activities politicians and parties are expected to provide for their voters; ‘involvement’ activities refer to website features that allow users to interact with each other or with a party representative
(i.e. discussion boards, live-chats, etc.); ‘connecting’ activities integrate a website into the context of other online actors (i.e. providing outside links to relevant other organisations’ and/or individuals’ websites); through ‘mobilising’ activities, a website offers users the opportunities for offline support and activism. These four types of communicative activities entail the use of different genres.

Although it would seem plausible that minor parties may rely more on their web-presence (as online activities are cheaper than offline campaigns), the majority of studies has found that major parties provide more sophisticated websites (Jackson & Lilleker 2009; Schweitzer 2008), which facilitate a greater variety of communicative activities. This is probably a result of their superior financial and organisational resources.

Apart from these global findings, some studies investigated the relation between parties’ ideological orientation and website functionalities. Analyses of candidates’ websites during the French presidential election campaign (Lilleker & Malagón 2010; Vaccari 2008c) as well as an investigation of Italian parties’ websites during parliamentary elections (Vaccari 2008b) showed that right-wing parties tend to provide more information materials on their websites, whereas left-wing parties provide more opportunities for involvement and mobilisation. In a study of Swedish party websites during an election year, Larsson (2011) reports similar results. Although ‘informing’ activities were employed most often by all parties under scrutiny and peaked during the election period, centre and centre-right parties included involving and mobilising features least often in their websites, whereas left-wing parties (and the tech-savvy Pirate party) made more use of these features. These results seem to indicate that ideological differences result in parties’ different communicative styles in terms of discursive activities they engage in with their voters: right-wing parties seem to apply a more ‘top-down’ communication style, whereas left-wing parties employ more grass-roots communication styles.

In a study of candidates’ personal websites in the 2009 elections for the European Parliament, Hermans & Vergeer (2013) focused on the ‘informing’ activities (and thus on the most traditional party-political communicative activity). They distinguished three topical dimensions (‘professional’, ‘personal preferences’, ‘home and family’), which allowed differentiated interpretations of the candidates’ websites. Results show that the majority of the EP candidates provided information on professional-, home- and family-related topics, but very little information on personal preferences. Candidates from the post-communist countries scored highest on the first two dimensions, whereas candidates from countries with longer democratic traditions received the lowest scores. Although Hermans and Vergeer concede that their measurement of personalisation strategies was basic (2013, pp, 87), their results are, in some respects, parallel with Jackson and Lillekers’ (2011) study of British MPs’ Twitter use as both studies suggest that politicians tend to use web facilities for personal impression management.

The review of studies on politicians’ (and political parties’) use of social media and Web 2.0 facilities integrated in web sites shows rather clearly that: (1) these social actors are quite slow in adopting Web 2.0 communication tools; (2) they seem to transfer offline communicative strategies and activities stemming from a ‘collective action’ logic (Bennet & Segerberg 2012) to their social-media use; and (3) their usage preferences do not match the preferences of the public they intend to represent. Politicians prefer the ‘elitist’ Twitter service and use Facebook much less often, whereas the usage patterns of their audience are reverse. Traditional politicians and politics thus make use of those communicative affordances of Web 2.0 communication tools that allow them to extend their traditional communicative genre use onto the internet. Furthermore, the results of the studies reported
here show that left and right parties seem to use ICTs for different communication strategies and hence use different genres.

Citizen-to-citizen communication: move on, but where to?

Since the early 1980s, ICTs have been considered to provide new possibilities for citizens’ political participation and self-organisation, which would eventually lead to a new era of deliberative democracy in a Habermasian sense (see Chouliaraki 2010). Expectations concerning the first aspect have been largely disappointed, as the overview of studies presented on p. 414 has shown. This section will deal with social media’s possible contributions to citizens’ self-organisation processes in the sense of Bennet and Segerberg’s (2012) concept of ‘connective action’.

In an overview of early studies that deal with the use of ICTs by new social movements, Garrett (2006), based on McAdam et al. (1996), identifies three relevant factors of social movements that communication technologies can influence: mobilising structures, opportunity structures and framing processes. The first factor refers to possibilities for ICTs to provide fast and widespread access to political information that is relevant for persons who are concerned with a certain political issue. In terms of communicative activities, the ‘mobilisation’ affordances of ICTs resemble traditional political-communication activities, yet they involve different social actors: in traditional political communication, political parties provide information for their supporters on their web sites (see above, p. 414), whereas ICTs enable activists to provide and spread their own personal views and information concerning movement-relevant issues that may lead to the rapid diffusion of social movements across geographical boundaries.

The second of Garrett’s factors, opportunity structures, concerns mainly technological factors of ICT accessibility and availability, and is therefore not directly relevant for a communication-activity perspective. The last factor, framing processes, concerns the opportunities ICTs offer new social movements for propagating their own accounts of relevant issues, without depending on traditional gatekeepers in the public and in the traditional media. Garrett’s framework provides a useful meta-perspective from which studies of social-media use by new social movements can be grouped and compared; it will be used to organise the following overview.

Although social-media platforms provide citizens with the opportunity to publicly express their views on various social and political problems without depending on media gatekeepers, the expression of individual political comments often amounts to ‘mediated self-representation’ (i.e. the public performance of identity), rather than to enduring participatory political engagement (Chouliaraki 2010). In a corpus study of postings to five blogs, Myers (2010) found an abundance of personal stance markers in blog posts as compared to a reference corpus from the British National Corpus. This result, Myers argues, reflects bloggers’ attempts to develop an original own position within a discussion, rather than contributing to an argumentation. Comparable results have been reported by van Zoonen et al. (2007) in their investigation of a bulletin board on the website of a popular US TV talk show and in Valera Ordaz’s (2012) study of political discussions on Facebook pages of Spanish politicians. Her results show that the majority of participants contributed only one posting, and that most of these postings supported (or even exaggerated) the politicians’ view on the issue under discussion. Furthermore, most postings do not realise deliberative argumentative – but rather, commenting – genres, as the following example from her data shows:
[1] I don’t know if we live in a country of gullible idiots or crazy people.
[2] ETA hasn’t said anything different.
[3] They’ve said that they’re not going to kill anyone as long as their conditions are met.
[5] They’re not in any way defeated.
[6] They have the necessary infrastructure to attack.
[7] They have an entire province.
[8] They have tax information on all of us.
[9] Have we gone nuts?
[10] Even the PP is celebrating the fact that ETA hasn’t said anything.
[11] It seems, Rosa, that you are the only politician who has her wits about her along with Mayor Oreja and Esperanza Aguirre.

(Valera Ordaz 2012, p. 161, translated to English by Valera Ordaz, clause numbers added by HG)

This posting shows some quite characteristic features of the personal comment genre: the author uses a considerable range of evaluative lexis (‘gullible idiots’, ‘crazy people’, ‘have we gone nuts’) and many markers of informal speech (e.g. the high number of contractions (clitics)). Furthermore, the posting is only vaguely argumentative insofar as clauses 2–8 (presenting explicit and implicit negative characterisations of ETA) can be understood as backings for the evaluative statement in clause 1. The rhetorical contrast between clauses 11 and the final clause 12 then serves as a booster for the positive appraisal of three politicians (including the page owner, Rosa Diez) whom the author obviously does not classify as being ‘idiots’ or ‘crazy’.

This example and the aforementioned studies seem to suggest that at least some of the Web 2.0 communication facilities have stimulated personal political expression without concern for an audience and thus merely serve as pressure-relief valves for frustrated citizens.

A similar, partly pessimistic view of the role of citizens’ self-produced content for new social movements can be found in Thorson et al.’s (2013) study of YouTube videos on the Occupy movement. The authors investigated the content of YouTube videos on the Occupy movement and traced the video-sharing practices that link YouTube and Twitter (i.e. tweeted links to YouTube videos, etc.) in order to analyse which roles social media play in new protest movements. They analysed all videos with Occupy-related keywords, as well as videos that were linked to Occupy-related tweets during November 2011. Thorson et al.’s results show that although the majority of videos in their corpus was footage of the protests, those videos tweeted (i.e. recommended by a Twitter user to their followers) and often watched were more-or-less professionally produced (‘cut and mix’), whereas genuine amateur videos received little attention. From the latter result, the authors concluded that social-media platforms such as YouTube (that are promoted as sites for sharing content) are also used for individual archival purposes. Thorson et al.’s results are interesting in two ways. First, the obvious archival use of YouTube shows that a social-media platform’s affordances may (at least for certain users) differ from the primary use it is promoted for. Second, their finding that it was mainly (semi-) professionally edited videos of the Occupy protests that went viral (i.e. were spread over several social-media platforms and were often watched) cautions against premature enthusiasm about the direct access a wider audience may have to ordinary citizens’ first-hand eye-witness documents through content-sharing platforms.

All the aforementioned studies show that, in terms of framing processes (see above), social-media platforms seem to facilitate the emergence of new genres of citizens’ political expressions (blog postings, video documents), but that these genres (1) may not (yet) be
optimally developed for the social purpose they are intended to fulfil, or that these genres (2) may reflect qualitatively new forms of citizens’ political expression that are not compatible with the current political system in modern Western democracies.

In the studies reported so far, citizens’ web activities accompanied (or commented on) real-life political events, which may be responsible for the disconnection between online and offline activities. Political events, however, that take place entirely on the web, may lead to different dynamics because of the mobilising effects ICTs provide. In a study of YouTube videos that reacted to a notorious anti-Islamic video produced and distributed via the internet by a right-wing populist Dutch politician, van Zoonen et al. (2010) identified three genres of citizens’ protest expressions: jamming, cut and mix, and vlogging (i.e. video-blogging). While jamming videos exploited YouTube’s tagging feature to complicate the search for the original video, and to express disagreement with the politician-producer of the film, cut-and-mix videos applied either satire or rational argumentation in order to counter the original video message. In the vlog genre, speakers (mostly representatives of organisations or frequent vloggers) provided rational argumentations against the original film. The authors conclude that these three video genres construct different forms of producers’ virtual citizenship and project different audiences. They further argue that their results would show that social media can serve as platforms for borderless political participation and interaction, and would thus present counter evidence to the pessimistic view adopted in the earlier studies reported above. As van Zoonen et al. do not present a systematic investigation of the numbers of viewers the videos in their corpus attracted, this interpretation may, however, be premature and both positions (the pessimistic and the optimistic) might be defendable.

Evidence for direct influence of citizens’ online activities on offline political action seems to be provided by Harlow’s (2012) study of a Guatemalan protest movement that was triggered by the murder of a lawyer. Harlow identified several genres (‘action frames’ in her terminology), which were used in Facebook groups created immediately after the incident. The most frequent genres were calls for action and the conveying of information. These online activities spurred massive offline protests. However, as Harlow reports, three months later, both offline protests and online activities in the Facebook groups had decreased substantially. Therefore, Harlow’s study, while providing evidence that online political activities can result in offline political action, also seems to suggest a certain flash-in-the-pan effect of these activities.

Some studies have focused on the use of Web 2.0 communication technologies during political activities. Theocharis (2013) and Earl et al. (2103) studied various aspects of Twitter use during protests. In his social network study, Theocharis found that student groups, during the 2010 university occupations in the UK, deliberately created horizontally linked Twitter account networks without clear centres in order to keep their communication lines intact, even when single nodes were shut down. The protesters thus actively took advantage of affordances of the communication platform in order to pursue their political goals.

In countries such as Spain, Egypt and Greece, social-media platforms played a substantial role in networking new social movements’ activities during protests on public squares. The activities resulted in hybrid spaces composed of multimodal representations and communications on different occupied squares (Martin Rojo 2014). The political and social effects of these recontextualisation practices, are, however, far from being obvious and clear. More research of the different local reinterpretations of shared images and videos would be needed to estimate how these signs are taken up by actors in different places (Chun 2014).
Forwarding relevant messages to followers (‘retweeting’) seems to have become a new, technology-supported communicative practice in citizens’ use of social media, as the study of Lotan et al. (2011) shows. The authors intended to identify the major participant roles of micro-blogging information flows in the Arab Spring Revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, but as a by-product, they found a high number of retweets in their data. Retweeting, thus, is a candidate (emerging) genre in which communicative needs and technological affordances converge.

Tweets sent during the protests against the 2009 G20 meeting in Pittsburgh were content analysed by Earl et al. (2013). Scrutinising the tweets’ topics, as well as applying a rough genre classification (‘information’ vs. ‘opinion’ vs. ‘question’ tweets), their results show a clear peak of Twitter activity during the protests and a focus on the broadcasting of (mainly location-related) information. In tweets concerning the police, the information component prevailed during the protests, whereas afterwards, opinion-related tweets peaked. An in-depth analysis of the police-related tweets showed that protesters monitored police activities and equipment closely in order to develop real-time tactics for pre-empting police actions. Earl et al.’s results show that protesters may use services such as Twitter in order to enhance their online-mobilising structures, which may eventually lead to a threat of the authorities’ information monopoly during protests and riots. This advantage, however, lasts only as long as the opportunity structures (in Garrett’s sense) are intact, that is, as long as ICTs are available and not monitored by the authorities. As events have shown during the uprisings in Egypt (where the authorities shut down services such as Twitter, albeit with limited success), in Iran and in Britain after the 2011 riots (where authorities used Twitter data to identify and prosecute key figures of the protests), or the situation in China (where the internet is constantly monitored by the authorities), the state powers are well aware of the opportunities ICTs provide for protesters and use their own technological capacities for counteracting protesters’ counteractions. Theocharis’ results, however, show that new protest movements may consciously attempt to circumvent the potential weaknesses of the communication tools they use.

Research on citizens’ use of social media and ICTs for their political participation and organisation reviewed above shows mixed results. ICTs facilitate fast dissemination and sharing of information, which offers participants advantages during protests and allows them to share experiences across geographically dispersed social movements. However, as Earl et al. (2013) caution, authorities are well aware of the advantages protesters gain through ICTs and may in turn use features of the new technologies for impeding protests and/or identifying and neutralising key figures or organisations. Furthermore, as Bennet & Segerberg (2012) show, not all internationally shared content ‘goes viral’. The political and social conditions for adopting messages, slogans, pictures, etc. in new contexts (i.e. the local terms of recontextualisation) may enhance or hinder the local adoption of political content shared via social media. The reported results also show that the often-hailed availability of first-hand eye-witness accounts of political events facilitated through social media has to be viewed with caution; as Thorson et al.’s (2012) study shows, those videos that attracted a wider audience were more-or-less professionally produced, whereas the genuine eye-witness accounts did not receive much attention. Sharing information (of various kinds and in different semiotic modes), which is often viewed as the key advantage new social movements gained from Web 2.0 technologies, thus turns out to be sensitive to local recontextualisation practices, as well as to (more-or-less) professional production practices. Furthermore, as Harlow’s study shows, social movements may be quickly sparked through the use of ICTs, but they may also disappear just as quickly.
Conclusions and outlook

The studies of ICT and Web 2.0 facility use in political communication have demonstrated a clear difference between parties’ and politicians’ communicative activities and the uses citizens make of these communicative tools. Whereas most political parties seem to use internet communication as a mere extension of their typical offline communication practices (i.e. mainly providing online information for their supporters), politicians use social media for various kinds of self-presentation. Both social actors thus merely seem to transfer traditional genres of political communication from offline to online communication environments.

The review of studies on citizens’ use of social media and ICTs for communicating on and during political events reveals mixed results. While studies that focus on citizens’ commenting activities on political events (blogging, discussion boards, sharing of video documents) seem to indicate a predominance of mediated self-presentation practices over genuine political-discussion activities, studies that investigate citizens’ use of social-media tools during political events show the emergence of genuinely new ‘genres’ of citizens’ political communication (e.g. sharing information on police locations and equipment during demonstrations, developing online tactics for pre-empting police actions). Viewed from a more abstract point of view, these results seem to indicate that citizens’ political participation through Web 2.0 communication tools does not enhance new social movements’ framing processes, but rather, it improves their mobilising structures (although the sustainability of movements that are exclusively based on ICT mobilisation has not yet been proven). Under a genre perspective, the review has shown that while in politician–citizen communication, the recontextualisation of traditional genres into new communicative forms prevails, in citizen–citizen political communication, genuinely new genres emerge.

The interpretation of the studies’ results in terms of genres of political communication has, however, to be taken with caution as most of the studies reviewed here were not conducted within a linguistic, discourse-analytic framework and provide, therefore, only few toeholds for an interpretation under a genre perspective. Most linguistic studies of Web 2.0 communication apply a corpus linguistic approach (Myers 2010; Zappavigna 2011), which does not allow for scrutinising communicative activities (genres) realised in and through social-media communication tools. Furthermore, the role of social-media companies that provide the platforms for – and influence – the software architecture used in communication practices have only rarely been accounted for (see, e.g. Eisenlauer 2014, albeit not on political-communication practices). The scarcity of studies of Web 2.0 political communication under a genre perspective may be due to the methodological-technological difficulties of the acquisition of data sufficient for the needs of discourse-analytical research, but these difficulties may be outweighed by the insights into communicative practices that shape many aspects of our daily lives to an increasing extent.

A further promising field for research under a genre perspective represents the ‘hybrid media system’ (Chadwick 2013). With this term, Chadwick refers to new media formats (genre networks) that combine genres of traditional electronic media with social-media genres (e.g. live Twitter streams that provide the input for political live TV discussions; Atifi & Marcoccia 2015). Investigating these hybrid genre networks (in which the boundaries between political and media communication become increasingly blurred), however, requires even more sophisticated methodological and technical tools and skills than the study of single social-media genres (see Elmer 2013). Overall, this survey of research has shown that political communication in social media provides discourse scholars and students with rich and promising opportunities for future investigations.
Note

1 Diez was then head of the Spanish leftist party Union, Progress and Democracy (UPyD).

References


Eisenlauer, V, 2014, ‘Facebook as a third author – (Semi-)automated participation framework in social network sites’, *Journal of Pragmatics*, vol. 72, pp. 73–85.


