

PARTIES, PIRATES AND POLITICIANS: THE 2014 EUROPEAN PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS ON CZECH TWITTER¹

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Abstract: The ongoing expansion of new communication technologies is inseparably linked to the transformation of political communication. The new thinking behind communication is embedded directly in the code of popular social networks. Can a formal political party successfully implement a decentralized mode of communication based on personal connections and weak social ties, or is it against the very logic of both the hierarchical organizations and the technology itself? Our case study describes the vast spectrum of various types of behavior of political actors on Twitter through computer-assisted analysis of Twitter communication in Czech Republic before the elections to the European Parliament in May 2014. The research is based on the concept of connective action, as defined by Bennett and Segerberg. Preliminary results show an emerging typology of campaign strategies, from formal and centralized campaigns on one hand to various hybrid overlaps of traditional and new forms of communication on the other.

Key words: connective action; European elections; Twitter analysis; Czech politics; political communication.

Introduction

The mechanics of social media communication have been a topic of interest in communication studies for a long time. Inevitably, internet politics has also come into the spotlight. Although there is strong emphasis on online activism and the general dynamics of social organization, research has also been conducted into the behavior of political parties (Gibson, Nixon, & Ward, 2003; Chadwick, 2006; Xenos & Foot, 2005). It is becoming apparent that the new communicative approach is affecting parties' communication strategies.

Before setting the research questions and further exploring this process, it is necessary to provide a precise definition of this new kind of communication. Its roots lie in two mutually interlinked discourses. First there is discussion around platform design and the overall role of

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technology in human communication, then there are other theoretical models of social and political organization in the age of the Internet. The first discourse involves a strong tradition of thinking about the technology as the autonomous subject of communication processes, either at the general theoretical level (Bogost, 2012; Kelly, 2010; Latour, 2007) or as applied to the subject of the political communication (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Pool, 1983; Winner, 1980). However, if we take this position and assume that the technology can act as a political actor, it is necessary to understand this phenomenon as part of a much wider, complex system of social communication. This kind of conceptualization can be found in the work of Manuel Castells (2012) in particular, but there are many partial specific applications (e.g. Dahlgren, 2009). For the purposes of this research, the best synthesis of both discourses is provided by Bennett and Segerberg in their seminal book *The logic of connective action* (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). They state that there is a wide array of online actors using different methods of organization and communication. In online activism, one end of the spectrum consists of more traditional actors (such as NGOs and activist movements) who have strong group identities and mutual ties, and are engaged in so-called collective action. At the opposite end are new actors like the Occupy movement, successfully applying the as yet less familiar logic of connective action—distributed and fluid communication without strong group ties and identity.

Can we apply this logic to the electoral campaigns of traditional political parties? Can a political party successfully implement a decentralized, networked mode of communication based on personal connections and weak community ties, or does this work against the very logic of both the hierarchical organizations and the technology itself? These are the questions we initially sought to answer.

In order to do so, we chose to focus on Twitter, which was also the subject of research by Vergeer, Hermans and Sams into the Dutch political system in the 2009 European Parliament (EP) (2011, p. 479), and we selected nine major parties as the primary subject of analysis. This decision immediately created another set of issues. The number of Czech Twitter users is quite low (there are around 190 000 Czech and Slovak accounts, compared to almost 4 million Facebook users and over 7 million Internet users in general)². Czech Twitter users are not representative of the general population, but are informed agenda setters (Probst, 2013). Political parties reflect this and for some of them, having a strong presence on Twitter is apparently not worth the effort. There are also some significant advantages to choosing Twitter as our research area. Most important, yet still overlooked somehow, is that it has an open API and relatively transparent mechanics, and has not yet been significantly deformed by paid advertising and having the reach of Facebook (Ratkiewicz et al., 2010).

One of the main features of online communication is its complex structure. The network communication pattern cannot be described adequately using simple qualitative or quantitative analysis. Our research was conducted through computer-assisted data retrieval and analysis using NodeXL software. It should be noted that even using this approach, the

² Statistics available at www.klaboseni.cz (in Czech). It should be noted that the method of calculation is questionable. The approx. 190 000 accounts are localized in the Czech Republic or Slovakia or used Czech or Slovak in at least 15% of tweets. Regarding our research, it seems that the actual number of active accounts in the Czech Republic is much lower, probably amounting to tens of thousands.

transient nature of networks in time still remains beyond our grasp. We are fully aware that the chosen research design makes fleeting connections seem permanent and thus somehow deforms the results, but it is an obstacle which we are unable to overcome (for a useful discussion about the issues of time and change in network analysis, see Schneider & Foot, 2005).

Finally, the analyzed datasets were transformed into visualizations. The Czech Twittersphere may be small and not representative of the whole population, but the findings of this study explain at least part of the ongoing transformation of the Czech political landscape and identify some of the emerging aspects of new communication logic in the field of electoral campaigning.

Research design

We have selected Twitter as our sole research field³. Twitter studies are slowly emerging as a specific academic field with its own issues and challenges. To avoid the worst of them, we decided to follow a few proven research designs. A valuable source of information was research of the 2009 EP elections by Vergeer, Hermans, and Sams (2011, p. 477). Further methodological preparations led us to Anders Larsson and Hallvard Moe's study of the 2010 Swedish elections on the communication patterns of high-end users (Larsson & Moe, 2012). For similar studies, see also Bruns (2012) or Poell and Bora (2012).

Since the very act of selecting individual elements of analysis predetermines the type of results we can obtain, it seemed necessary to include as many types of connection between Twitter users (replies, mentions and hashtags)⁴ to fully grasp the complex shape of the communication activities of selected subjects (Hansen, Schneiderman, & Smith, 2011, p. 149). Unlike Bruns (2012), Larsson and Moe (2012) or Poell and Bora (2012), we do not consider hashtags as the main criterion for data collection and instead focused on the mentions and (re)tweets.

The analysis itself was divided into two parts. First, we compared the basic numerical values, then we used NodeXL graph mapping to ascertain the general shape of parties' communication networks and identify the main clusters of interconnected accounts and users.

There were a total of 38 Czech political parties competing for EP seats, but most of them were fringe subjects with marginal voter support. After careful examination, we selected nine major parties for analysis. Seven of them eventually gained seats in the EP⁵ while another

³ Since it is seen as the most popular microblogging service (boyd, Golder, & Lotan, 2010, p. 2) and simultaneously as a dynamic space for public political communication (Larsson & Moe, 2012).

⁴ Some authors claim that the purpose of each action on Twitter is different. When replying, the user is influenced or affected by someone's else content such that he has to react (it is an act of conversation). Where retweeting is concerned, the situation is a little different - the important content has to be reproduced to other users (Leavitt et al., 2009).

⁵ Surprisingly the elections were won by ANO2011 with 16.13% of the vote, followed by TOP09, ČSSD (Czech Social Democratic Party), KSČM (Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia), KDU-ČSL (Christian and Democratic Union – Czechoslovak People's Party), ODS (Civic Democratic Party) and finally the Free Citizens' Party (Czech Statistical Office, 2014).

two did not succeed (the Green Party and the Pirate Party), but we decided to take them into account for reasons explained below.

We identified each party's official account and all the accounts of the candidates and collected datasets of tweets for a one-month period before the elections held on 23rd and 24th May 2014 (the data were gathered from April 23rd, 2014 onwards). The generally low usage of Twitter among Czechs was reflected in the accordingly low usage among politicians—only 26.5% of all candidates have a Twitter account and only 17.8% displayed much activity during the campaign. All the datasets were filtered prior to the analysis and visualization. In the end, we had over 25 000 tweets from over 3000 Twitter users.

Mapping the communication networks

The parties were divided into three main groups. The first consists of small parties with an activist background, where we expected to find some elements of connective action logic. The Green Party, the Pirate Party and the Free Citizens' Party were categorized in this group, nicknamed "The Believers". The second group consists of two major parties, ANO2011 and TOP09, which display strong cartel-like features and a technocratic approach to politics. These actors invested a significant amount of money in the campaign and employed skilled PR professionals—we nicknamed them "The Marketers". The third group, "The Traditionalists", comprises the remaining major parties who have mixed campaign strategies.

The Believers

The longest active party with the largest membership in this group is the Czech Green Party. Apart from their usual activities, many members are active in various activist movements and citizen initiatives, which led us to the assumption that they may very well use activist tactics and connective features in their campaign.

The final results were largely inconclusive, especially when compared to other parties in this group. Although they produced a large Twitter conversation buzz (2666 tweets relating to the party and candidates), have the most active party profile (200 tweets) and engaged more than 570 Twitter users in the general conversation, their appeal or ability to prompt conversation was rather average.⁶ Their communication was focused on the central party account and the personal account of chairman Ondřej Liška. These two accounts (and to some extent the account of Anna Durnová, a candidate) were also the only ones that caught the attention of a wider audience. Another interesting fact is that the accounts of European MPs or other people associated with European politics also occupied more central positions. It should be noted that the Free Citizens' Party account had a fairly central position indicating that the Free Citizens' Party was often mentioned in the same tweets as the Green Party. The combined mentions of the Greens, the Pirates and the Free Citizens' Party were identified during the analysis of communication by these parties, so it is quite obvious that our group categorization was not arbitrary, but based on widely shared public perceptions of these three actors.

⁶ For a detailed overview, see Table 1.

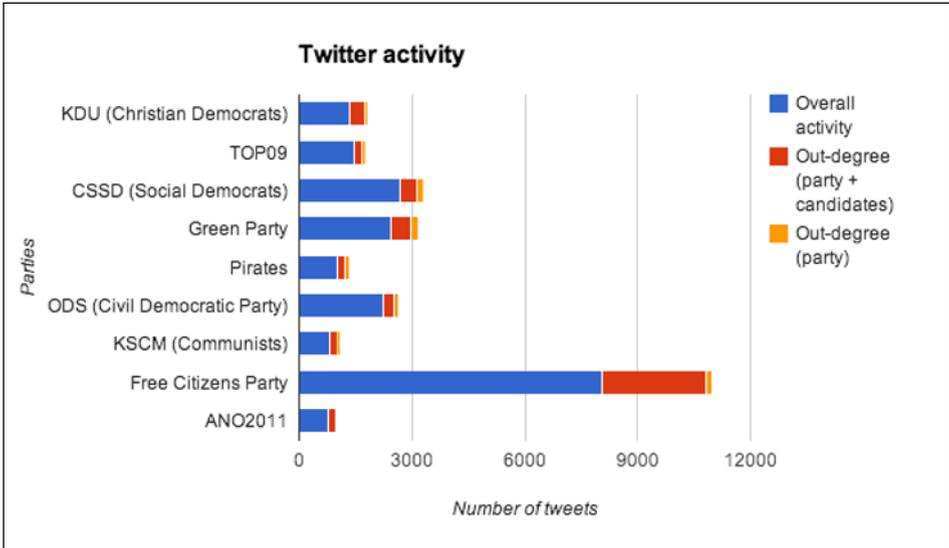


Table 1. Twitter activity of parties and candidates

This dynamic is emphasized in the cluster graph visualization⁷. Apart from the central party account, the biggest clusters were concentrated around the chairman and a couple of the active candidates, indicating the strong personalization of the campaign. These conversations were interlinked with clusters around European actors. Most journalists' accounts were merged in one cluster together with the conversation around the Free Citizens' Party. This may lead to the assumption that the Free Citizens' Party was both very active in conversation (confirmed by the values in Table 1) and that journalists and active Twitter users conceptualized them in the same way we do here.

Regarding the concept of connective action, the Pirate Party has at least theoretically the best potential to successfully apply its mechanics. A brief look at the Swarmwise manual written by the original Swedish party founder, Rick Falkvinge, reveals that the Pirates are well aware of this new communication principle and how it is applied.

You do the vision, the Swarm does the talking. (...) Activists must have the ability to inspire and learn from one another without you as a bottleneck in between them. They need to be in control of the message, as translated from your vision,

says Falkvinge (2013) as he explains the decentralized, fluid, sometimes even anonymous communication tactics of Pirates. This gave us reason to assume that the party's communication will be strongly influenced by current activist tactics. The Czech Pirate Party

⁷ Due to space constraints and overall readability, only three graphs were selected as examples of our visualization analysis. However, both cluster visualizations and visualizations of indegree/outdegree level of communication were made in multiple versions for each of the researched political parties.

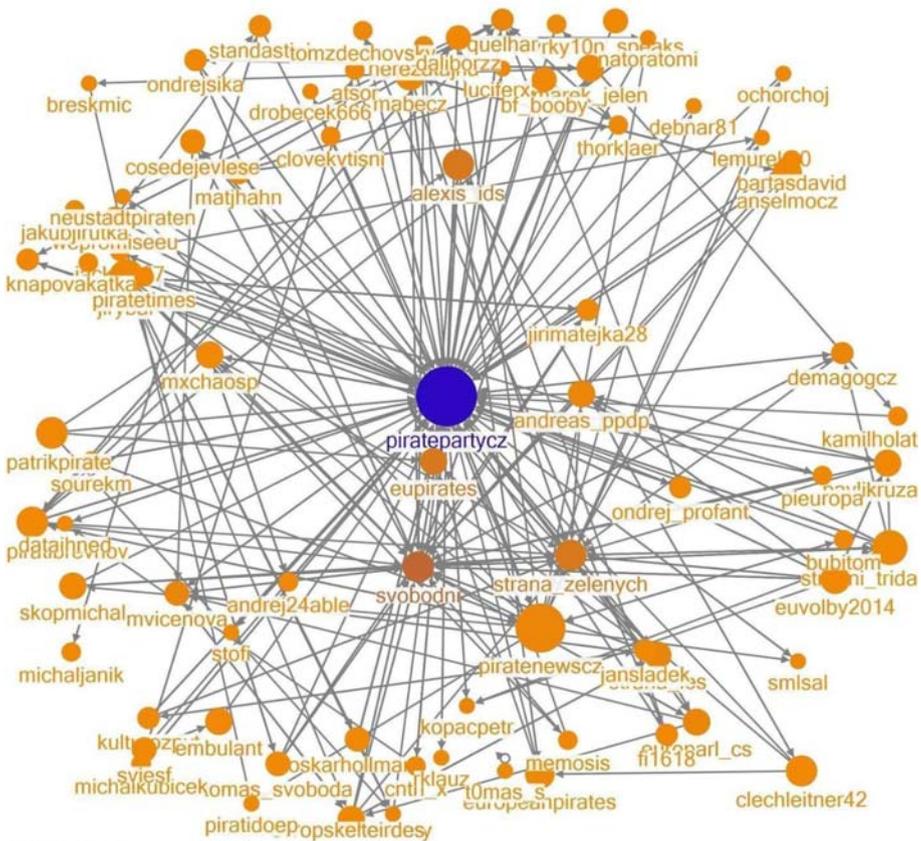


Figure 1. Indegree /Outdegree level of the Czech Pirate Party Twitter communication. (Key: the central position is occupied by the official party account, other central nodes are the European Pirates, the party news account @piratenewsycz, and quite significantly, the Free Citizens and the Green Party. The blue color indicates the node with the largest number of incoming messages and/or mentions).

only implemented some of Falkvinge’s instructions, but there are indeed strong elements of connective action logic.

In the Pirate Party datasets, we counted 1031 tweets in the general conversation around the party, 135 tweets were sent from the party account, and more than 250 Twitter users engaged in the conversation. The number of messages received by the party and candidates was quite high (453), while the level of outgoing traffic was not impressive (188 tweets sent by the party and candidates). However, we quickly discovered that this did not indicate a fault in their campaign design, but rather in our methodology. In keeping with Falkvinge’s ideas, communication by the Czech pirate party is fairly decentralised and apart from the central

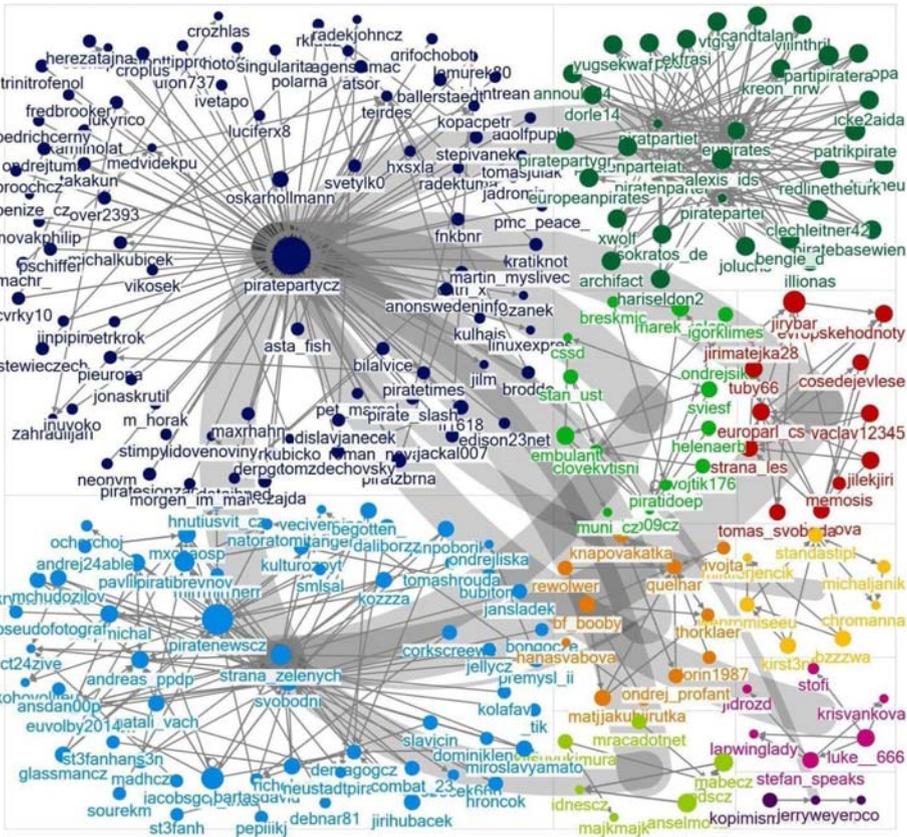


Figure 2. Cluster concentration of the Czech Pirate Party Twitter communication (Key: the top left cluster marked in dark blue is concentrated around the party account, the bottom left cluster consists of the Green and Free Citizens parties together with journalists, the top right cluster marked in dark green leads to European actors).

account, a large number of messages are generated by their news service/portal Pirate News (@piratenewscz) and regional party cells and supporters.

The visualizations confirmed that communication by the Pirate was less centralized than communication by the Green Party. Along with the central party account, central positions were occupied by the European Pirates account, Pirate News media portal as well as various active commentators and supporters. It is interesting that the Green Party and Free Citizens' Party accounts received a great deal of incoming traffic relating to the conversation with the Pirate Party. This further confirms the widespread categorization of these three parties as somehow related and interconnected.

The cluster graph confirmed the presence of a few features that were also observed in relation to the Green Party. The main cluster was concentrated around the party account, another cluster was connected to European actors (along with other Pirate Parties abroad) and a third cluster contained the Free Citizens and Green Party accounts together with journalists, active Twitter commentators and the Pirate News service. We selected the visualizations of the Pirate Party's communication datasets as the best examples for this particular group of parties.

The last, and probably the most interesting party in the first group is the Free Citizens' Party. Unlike the Greens and the Pirates, they successfully crossed the legal 5% threshold and gained one seat in the EP (taken by their chairman, Petr Mach).

The Free Citizens' Party was most active during the pre-election period. We counted 8046 tweets in the general conversation around the party and its candidates, 2758 tweets sent from the central account or by the candidates, 5288 incoming messages and 1424 users engaged in the conversation. The large amount of activity by Free Citizens' supporters and their overall appeal is further evidenced in the fact that the central account was only moderately active and 198 tweets sent were sent from it (i.e. more or less the same number as the Greens or Social Democrats).

Their main assets were members and candidates who actively communicated. Our figures show that almost all the central positions in their communication network were occupied by the candidates, and their activity surpassed even the central party account (which still received the largest number of mentions and messages). The high level of candidate activity may motivate further qualitative analysis (see Discussion)—we can speculate that the shared values play a significant role in Free Citizens' communication.

However, the cluster visualisation provides a much more nuanced description of the group dynamic. The first noticeable feature was the absence of any European connection—that may be not surprising considering that the Free Citizens had no representatives in the EP, but on the other hand, one could reasonably expect at least some connection to their British or German Eurosceptic counterparts. A second important observation is that the role of the party was somehow played down in the Twitter communication and that most of the activity was concentrated around the two or three most active candidates and their supporters, who were further communicating with a loosely knit group of journalists and commentators (the central cluster marked in light green). It therefore appears that the strong presence of the Free Citizens' Party in our dataset is down to the intense activity and Twitter presence of its candidates and supporters, combined with its strong ideological identity and subsequent interest among journalists. However, there is a strong possibility that a viral information cascade⁸ was at play and the Free Citizens gained this degree of attention not only because of their own outspoken supporters, but also because of the well known viral dynamics, which are so important for the social networks. Nevertheless, this is still mostly speculation, since the presence of viral features can only be confirmed by detailed analysis of information spread across time, which we purposefully omitted from our research design.

⁸An information cascade is a communication pattern typically found in social networks, commonly compared to the spread of a virus. Once the cascade has initially been triggered, the information spreads from one user to the many other users connected to him and so on (for a useful explanation, see Dotey, Rom, & Vaca, 2011).

The Marketers

Our analysis confirmed that the common perception of the Greens, the Pirates and the Free Citizens as a single specific group in Czech politics is relatively accurate and that Twitter activity before the elections reflected this perception. Party communication in our two other groups is not so interconnected, but we can still identify some connections and common patterns of activity. TOP09 and ANO2011 were grouped because of their shared features, typical of cartel parties—a relatively strong position in the parliament and national politics in general, top-down management, a small number of members and blurred boundaries between members and supporters, and the overall technocratic and depoliticised nature of their activities (detailed definition in Katz and Mair, 1995). Both parties are also new and have risen to power quite quickly (TOP09 was established in 2009, ANO2011 in 2012). Their campaign budgets were also quite large, 18.5 million CZK—approx. 667 000 EUR for ANO2011 and 10 million CZK—approx. 361 000 EUR for TOP09—only ČSSD had a bigger budget of approx. 25 million CZK—approx. 902 000 EUR (Transparency International Czech Republic, 2014).

In terms of Twitter activity, TOP09 attracted more users and we collected 1446 tweets from 344 users in the general conversation. Their central party account sent 86 tweets and the candidates 131 tweets. TOP09 has a relatively low level of incoming traffic with only 581 tweets and mentions. The most central position in their communication network was occupied by the official party account along with the @europarl_cs official Czech account of the European Parliament. The cluster visualisation has led to similar findings—the EP account was clustered along with the accounts of journalists and some of the TOP09 politicians were connected with some of their ČSSD counterparts, although the exact nature of these connections cannot be identified.

In the case of ANO2011, our research design proved partially incompatible with their communication strategy. The most dominant feature of their Twitter communication is the account of founder and leader Andrej Babiš and more than 20 000 followers, i. e. about 10-15% of the entire Czech Twitter population (Babiš, 2014). After careful examination, we decided to omit his account from our data collection, because it would have deformed our results and the account does not meet our criteria anyway (it is not a candidate or central party account). Apart from the leader's account, ANO2011 or its candidates were mentioned in 779 tweets from 280 users in the general conversation, the candidates sent 200 tweets and the central party account was inactive. The central positions in this communication network were occupied by leading candidate Pavel Telička along with another candidate—Petr Ježek—, the official party account and the chairman's account.

The Traditionalists

In terms of the categorization of selected parties, the third group might appear to be the most arbitrary. The parties—ODS, ČSSD, KSČM and KDU-ČSL—are indeed different and positioned at various ends of the left-right scale, but they still share a few common features. They all have a significant number of members (at least compared to the parties in the other groups) and they have been present at the top level of Czech politics since the early 1990s.

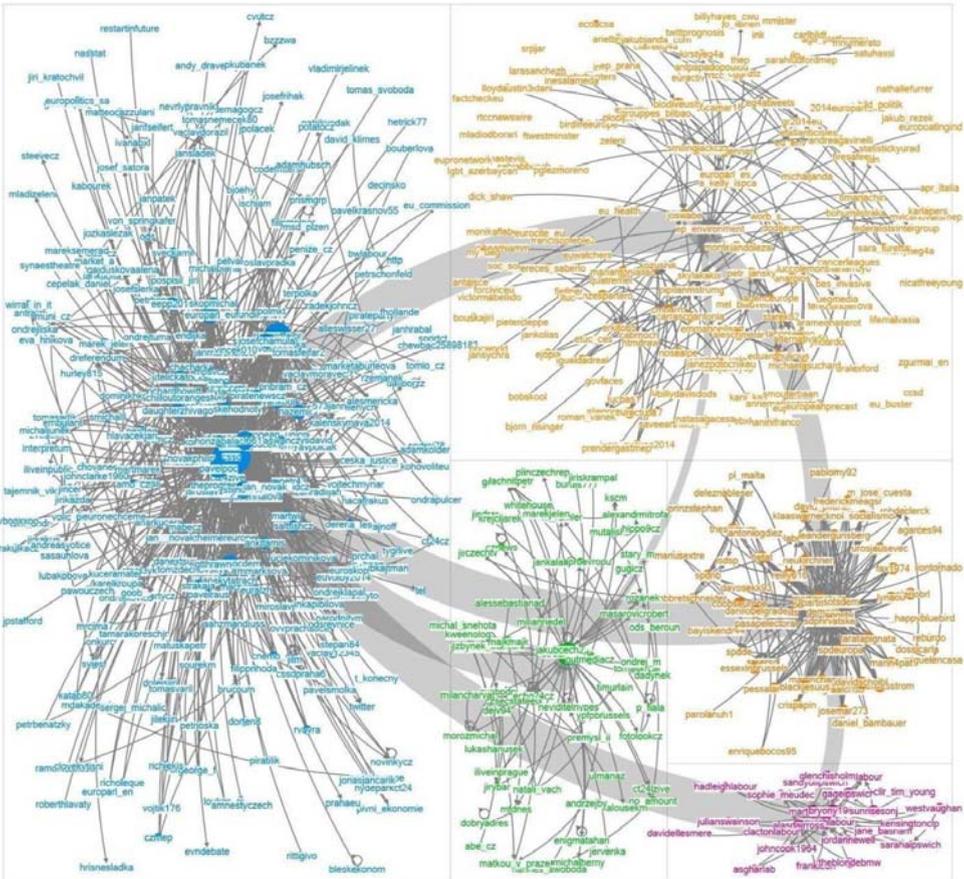


Figure 3. Cluster concentration of ČSSD Twitter communication (Key: The largest cluster on the left is concentrated around the central party account and the candidates, the light green cluster in the middle contains active commentators, the two yellow clusters on the right are the European supporters and the bottom right cluster marked in purple contains accounts associated with left-wing politicians in the UK.)

Probably the most surprising results were obtained from the communication by ČSSD. Their communication was indeed heavily centralized and had no obvious grassroots support, but they still attracted significant attention—approx. 2666 tweets from 599 users⁹. Central positions in the communication network were occupied by the official party account and

⁹ The datasets for ČSSD had to be heavily filtered because of the large number of unrelated tweets and conversations.

by candidate Richard Falbr.¹⁰ The party and its candidates sent 447 tweets and received 870 mentions, retweets or replies—on average, the Social Democrats were the third most active party after the Free Citizens and Greens. They also had the strongest connection to European politics and a large proportion of their communication activity consisted of communication with or among their European supporters, as we can see below in Figure 3. ODS communication was broadly similar, but the communication was more personalized, the general activity was lower and also the European connection was not as strong as that of ČSSD. The general conversation around ODS consisted of 2225 tweets from 530 users and the party and its candidates sent 311 messages—there was an interesting disproportion between the outgoing and ingoing traffic—the total amount of ingoing connections was 1914 tweets. The cluster visualisation showed a rather divided network with clusters concentrated around the official party account and three leading candidates, with visible European connections.

KSČM and KDU-ČSL results were partly deformed by the generally low level of Twitter activity, so we cannot make any definitive conclusions about their behaviour. The communication by both parties concentrated around the accounts of a few active candidates (Kateřina Konečná for KSČM and Tomáš Zdechovský for KDU-ČSL, who also provided most of his party's European connections). There is a disproportionate amount of outgoing and ingoing traffic, especially concerning KSČM, and the only notable feature is their visible European connection. It is interesting that KSČM's most connected "European" account was that of Alexis Tsipras, leader of Greece's Syriza party. The surplus of incoming traffic cannot be precisely explained without further content analysis of incoming tweets, but in KSČM's case, the party's controversial role in contemporary Czech society (it is the largest remnant of the pre-revolution ruling communist party) apparently has a strong effect—people can complain about the party and discuss communist ideology in general.

Discussion

There is a vast number of theories on online political communication. With some generalization, we can divide them into two major groups. The camp of Net optimists is usually keen to emphasize the new and revolutionary dynamics of online politics (Rheingold, 2002; Shirky, 2008, overview also in Siapera, 2012) while the sceptics state that it is all "business as usual" (Margolis & Moreno-Riaño, 2009). However, in our case it seems that both discourses hold without being contradictory.

Our expectations on connective action features were fulfilled, but not to the extent we presumed. It is true that there are indeed political actors who use either the new connective logic of communication or the collective action tactics usually associated with citizen activism, but it is rare, and the communication by most of the new actors is not significantly different from the communication by traditional parties. There is a visible interdependency between the online presence of a party and its offline status—the big, traditional parties who have previously held seats in the European Parliament usually have developed Twitter

¹⁰ For no obvious reason, a small Czech NGO *NaZemi* occupied a fairly central position, it seems that some of the conversation was focused on environmental issues.

networks and the overall communication activity around their accounts on Twitter is quite high. This is especially the case with ČSSD and ODS.

The analysis shows that only the communication by the Czech Pirate party and to some extent the Free Citizens' Party contains some features of connective communication logic. The Pirates are heavily interconnected; they place little emphasis on a shared collective identity, their communication is organic and largely undirected, and their members and supporters play a significant role. The specific nature of their Twitter communication meant that our research design failed to account for a significant portion of data (tweets and activity relating to the omitted accounts), but some features of connective action logic are still obvious. The Czech Pirate Party appears to be one of the most interesting in terms of possible further research, both in terms of quantitative analysis and analysis of their own communication manuals (Falkvinge, 2013). The Free Citizens' Party communication has the same features, but the group identity is much stronger and the position of the party is more central in their communication network. Unlike the Pirates, the Free Citizens are pushing a clearly defined political agenda and the overall activity around their candidates' accounts was the highest of all the parties. The Free Citizens and the Pirates are commonly perceived as being part of the same group of parties, along with the Green Party. This perception was confirmed by our research, but the Green Party communication in fact differed from the other two. Their communication network is heavily personalized and concentrated around the central party account and the account of its chairman. Unlike the Free Citizens, the Greens do not have a strong network of dedicated supporters on Twitter.

In the case of the second group of analyzed parties, we also found that the communication tactics of TOP09 and ANO2011 share common features. Both have a weak or non-existent network of active supporters, a weak group identity, a low level of connection to European politicians and they attract significant attention from journalists and active Twitter commentators. The communication is heavily centralized, either around the central party account (TOP09, to some extent) or the chairman's account (ANO2011). The market-oriented nature of these parties is quite obvious and we can assume that their relatively low level activity on Twitter is not caused by insufficient communication skills, but because of a preference for other, more efficient channels, e. g. Facebook, outdoor advertising etc.

The categorization of the third group of parties, consisting mostly of the traditional mass parties, proved to be mostly arbitrary, but even in this case we can trace a few common features. ODS and ČSSD communication was centralized around the official party accounts, there was a relatively low number of active candidates, but on the other hand, both parties attracted significant interest from journalists and active Twitter users. They also had a strong connection to European politicians (all of the parties in this group have been present in the European Parliament before). The Social Democrats were surprisingly well connected, albeit their communication was entirely based on centralized party communication, the strong offline power positions of their candidates and also strong support from their colleagues in the EP. The remaining two parties, KSČM and KDU-ČSL, share the same features, except for the higher number and more central position of active candidates. However, this was probably caused by the very low level of their general Twitter activity and so it is not possible to reach any exact conclusions about their tactics and motivation.

We can conclude that at least in this particular case, it appears that the social dynamic is not changing dramatically (personal connections and mass media attention still matter), but the logic of communication is very obviously undergoing transformation. While it is true that most parties do not exploit the potential of Twitter and do not try to connect more closely with their potential voters and use Twitter in the one-to-many mode of the old mass media logic, some of the new players—in this case the Free Citizens' Party and the Czech Pirate Party—are successfully incorporating some features of either the new connective action logic or the more traditional collective action logic into their communication strategies.

The principles, mechanisms, and strategies underlying social media logic may be relatively simple to identify, but it is much harder to map the complex connections between platforms that distribute this logic: users that use them, technologies that drive them, economic structures that scaffold them, and institutional bodies that incorporate them,

says José van Dijck (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013, p. 11). In light of our findings, this statement can be confirmed. There are some questions which cannot be answered without further research. In order to better understand the Twitter communication, it is necessary to conduct qualitative content analysis and determine how many of the conversations are political and how big the share of meaningful conversations is compared to mere attention-grabbing. There are also the pressing issues of the time and fluidity of the conversations. Only further analysis of the time dynamic of the conversations can determine if viral information cascades featured strongly, which we can presume is the case with the Free Citizens, but also other parties. Finally, the most important question left to answer is whether the connective, fluid and decentralized logic of communication is compatible with the logic of the organization and communication of any given contemporary political party, or whether the aforementioned parties constitute a rare exception with little possibility of replication in different organizational settings.

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