Going Viral? Comparing Parties on Social Media During the 2014 Swedish Election

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Going Viral?
Comparing Parties on Social Media During the 2014 Swedish Election

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Abstract
While research has provided useful insights into political party use of Twitter, comparably few efforts have focused on the arguably more popular Facebook service. This paper takes both platforms into account, detailing similar functionalities and providing analyses of the social media activities undertaken by Swedish political parties during the 2014 elections. Moreover, the types of feedback received by the parties on these platforms are gauged. Findings suggest that while sizeable parties are not necessarily the most ardent at using social media, they do receive the most attention. In essence, then, party size matters - however, the role of the right-wing populist Sweden Democrats is clearly felt throughout, suggesting the apparent prowess of controversial parties in the online context.

Keywords
Political Communication, Social Media, Facebook, Twitter, Sweden, Election Campaign
Introduction

While the largely sober, perhaps even “somber assessments” (Vaccari, 2008b: 2) of previous research would suggest largely conservative efforts on behalf of political actors online (e.g. Larsson, 2013; Margolis and Resnick, 2000), the advent of so-called web 2.0 rationales for web design, coupled with the emergence of a range of services often collectively understood as social media, have yet again raised expectations regarding politician and party utilization of platforms like Facebook or Twitter. While a range of studies are available regarding the uses of the latter of these two services (see Jungherr, 2014 for an overview), a comparably smaller amount of work has been performed looking into Facebook use at the hands of political parties. Even fewer studies undertake multi-modal efforts, combining analysis of activity on both services (as recommended by Kim et al., 2013; Vergeer and Hermans, 2013). The current study, then, makes a contribution in this regard.

Given the popularity of Facebook – especially when compared to Twitter (Bruns, 2011) - more scholarly insights are needed concerning political uses of social media in a broader sense. While in-depth case studies can certainly provide rich insights into the practices associated uniquely with one specific platform, our current effort features a different approach. Specifically, what is presented here is a study of Facebook and Twitter use at the hands of Swedish political parties during the 2014 general elections. While previous research has indicated the routine aspect of simply having an online presence – in the form of web sites (Gibson, 2004; Druckman et al., 2007) or on the services discussed here (Groshek and Al-Rawi, 2013) – further insights are needed into the actual use as undertaken by political actors – and the types of feedback that this activity yields on both platforms (Hansen and Kosiara-Pedersen, 2014). Indeed, such a focus on the outcome of party online activity is seemingly suggested by Bimber (2014), who states that “new tools are broadly
available […] scholars can learn little from comparing which candidate has more, or better, technology” (132). With this in mind, the study at hand moves beyond what could be described as the often employed dichotomous approach – essentially asking ‘has/has not’ type questions (e.g. Marcinkowski and Metag, 2014; Strandberg, 2013). Instead, it adopts an approach that allows for different types of insights regarding the overarching implications of the online actions of different types of parties – specifically differentiating between comparably larger and smaller competitors. Employing a series of overarching quantitative analytical efforts, the study is guided by two research questions, the first of which is phrased as follows:

*To what extent did Swedish political parties use Facebook and Twitter during the 2014 election?*

Taking different types of feedback that could tentatively be received into account, the second research question reads accordingly:

*What types of feedback did Swedish political parties receive on Facebook and Twitter during the 2014 election?*

The previously suggested broad availability of novel online tools is perhaps especially valid in our case country of Sweden. Featuring high levels of voting attendance as well as an “avant-garde position regarding Internet access, broadband and social media penetration” (Gustafsson, 2012: 1111), Swedish political actors have similarly been known as early adopters and ardent users of various web technologies (Vergeer et al., 2012) – with some variation (Larsson and Kalsnes, 2014; Larsson, 2011). As such, the selected case should
make for some interesting insights – especially since it is undertaken outside the often-studied anglo-american context (as suggested by Hermans and Vergeer, 2012). With this in mind, the subsequent section outlines the specific analytical rationale for the study at hand – comparing political parties of varying sizes.

**Size is Everything? Larger and Smaller Political Parties Online**

While the influx of the Internet in general and tendencies of political professionalization in particular led to suggestions of individual politicians gaining more power vis-à-vis their respective party organizations (e.g. Lisi, 2013), the traditionally party-centered Swedish parliamentary system has largely remained focused as such also in the digital age (e.g. Oscarsson and Holmberg, 2013). While individual politicians have certainly made clear marks of their own in various online spheres, their respective party organizations are still important when it comes campaign initiation and overall orchestration of such activities. The focus on parties in this regard thus appears as suitable.

As for our specific case, the 2014 Swedish parliamentary election saw the eight-year incumbent liberal-conservative alliance facing a series of different challengers, the largest of which were the Social Democrats. As a result of the 2010 elections, the right-wing populist Sweden Democrats made their way into parliament. However, throughout the four-year period between the former and the current election, the remainder of parliamentary representatives made clear efforts to block many of the often-controversial issues advocated by this latter party to come to fruition. For both elections, two prominent minor candidates also succeeded in making their voices heard – at least to some extent. Although neither the Feminist Initiative Party nor the Pirate Party managed to gain access to parliament in the election, they were both able to raise interest among the populace enough to be a part of pre-
election media coverage and some of the televised debates. The weeks leading up to Election Day in September 14th saw a close race between the liberal-conservative alliance and their Social Democratic challengers, resulting in a shift of power, where the latter of the two formed a minority coalition government with the Environmental Party.

Given these basic characteristics of the Swedish political system as outlined in Table One – Two large parties, two rather small ‘outsider’ parties and one controversial party – previous research on the topic at hand can provide us with some insights regarding what to expect in terms of online performance as a result of party size or party ideology. The suggestion that party size would have an influence on such activity, both by the party itself as well as by their supposedly larger share of supporters, might seem self-evident. However, research has shown that while comparably smaller parties proved to be more geared towards online campaigning endeavors during the popularization of the Internet during the mid-1990s (e.g. Sadow and James, 1999; Strandberg, 2009; Gibson, 2004), they were eventually overtaken with regards to web site functionality, design sophistication and overall quality by their more sizeable competitors (e.g. Lilleker et al., 2011). This development is neatly summarized by Hansen and Kosiara-Pedersen who suggest that “even if new technologies require fewer resources, they still require time and money” (2014: 207). Indeed, curating a high-standard web site is associated with such costs – costs that are arguably smaller when one considers undertaking activity on the largely ‘ready-made’ platforms of Facebook and Twitter. With such comparably low-cost alternatives in mind, more recent research findings have suggested what could be labeled a ‘leapfrog’ or perhaps circular tendency, where smaller parties are yet again leading the way in utilizing online services – now for social media (Koc-Michalska et al., 2014; Gibson and McAllister, 2014).
As Gibson et al has suggested that “party does matter, although not necessarily in terms of size” (Gibson et al., 2008: 26), the influence of ideology on the matters at hand appears as particularly salient in Sweden. As previous scholarship has suggested that right-wing populist or extremist parties have been successful in gaining online feedback despite rather low levels of activity undertaken by the parties themselves (Larsson, 2014), the presence of the Sweden Democrats might serve as a case in point. Albeit not a major party at the time of data collection, they emerged after the 2014 elections as the third largest party (gaining close to thirteen percent of the vote), superseded only by the two ‘catch-all’ parties – the Social Democrats (thirty-one percent) and the Conservatives (twenty-three percent). Accordingly, we might expect the combination of a ‘mid-sized’ and ideologically marginalized party to be especially potent with regards to the topic at hand.

As discussed above, while our knowledge about factors influencing the online activities undertaken by the parties themselves might be somewhat uncertain, our insights into the factors influencing the level of feedback received in relation to this activity are perhaps even more limited – especially in the multi-modal setting employed in the current paper. The next section details the conceptual design favored to facilitate a comparison between the two different, yet also similar social media services under scrutiny.

**Comparing Feedback Options on Twitter and Facebook**

While Twitter and Facebook are sometimes seen as similar in terms of their usage, they are distinctly different in terms of their respective technical infrastructures, appearance and terminology (e.g. boyd and Ellison, 2008). Nevertheless, the argument is made here that the user of both services is faced with a series of feedback options that are somewhat similar in that they offer comparable modes of communication. The three suggested modes –
Redistributing, Interacting and Acknowledging – and their distinctive counterpart on each platform are presented in Figure One.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Twitter</th>
<th>Facebook</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Redistribute</strong></td>
<td>Retweet</td>
<td>Share</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interact</strong></td>
<td>Mentions, @mention (Direct Message)</td>
<td>Comment (Chat)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Acknowledge</strong></td>
<td>Favorite</td>
<td>Like</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure One. Three types of feedback functionalities on Twitter and Facebook

First, much as Twitter users can employ the retweet functionality to **Redistribute** a tweet sent by some other user, so can a Facebook user choose to share posts made by others – such as the political parties under scrutiny here. Indeed, the potential spread and final, actual spread of the redistributed message is dependent on a multitude of factors – individual user settings and preferences, platform characteristics, previous selections made et. c. (e.g. Bucher, 2012). Nevertheless, from the perspective of those actors whose messages are being redistributed in retweets or shares, this type of feedback must be regarded as very attractive. It allows for their dispatches to spread beyond their own networks, potentially reaching the attractive status of ‘virality’ (Klinger and Svensson, 2014).
Second, while Interaction has been pointed to as the defining character of the Internet, uptake of such practices among politicians and parties has been mostly slow and hesitant (e.g. Stroemer-Galley, 2000; 2014), indicative of the risk of exposure and embarrassment taken when interacting as a politician (Marcinkowski and Metag, 2014). Be that as it may, the functionalities for contacting and commenting are by now a commonplace feature on each platform. For Twitter, the practice of mentioning another user by including their user name somewhere in the body of a tweet (often called an @mention) signals willingness to interact - perhaps especially so when the user addressed is mentioned at the beginning of the tweet (for more, see Twitter, 2014). Moreover, both studied 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 One so as to indicate their less than public nature. Finally for this category, while citizens might not choose to engage in discussion with political actors in these ways, leaving room instead for the established “Twitterati” (Bruns and Highfield, 2013), gaining comments and @mentions can be seen as indicative of having an interesting (or controversial, or both) message to convey – a message yielding reactions in terms of attempted interaction initiated by social media users.

Third, features such as favorite marking a tweet or liking a Facebook post are seen here as a way for users to show appreciation or to Acknowledge the message sent. The exact role of these measurements in deciding the influence of a specific user or post on either studied platform remains somewhat unclear. While the sharing or retweeting of posts and tweets are arguably more important for the coveted viral effects to occur (Socialbakers, 2013), the tracking of likes and favorites are nevertheless of interest for our current purposes as they allow us to track the different ways that Twitter and Facebook is employed for feedback in the current thematic setting. With these issues in mind, the forthcoming analyses will take
all these measurements into account, but will focus especially on the Redistributive feedback gained by the parties under scrutiny.

Based on the above reasoning, Figure One provides an overview of the empirical focus of the study at hand. While tracking these measurements will provide useful insights into the effects of online political communication, the adopted study design nevertheless misses out on other aspects of Twitter and Facebook use. First, while @mentions and comments are open in the sense that other users can potentially take part of them, both platforms offer ‘hidden’ or more private of interacting as well. For ethical as well as for methodological reasons, this direct communication could not be included in the present work. Second, while the procedural definitions of the terms associated with each service might be clear, the current study cannot make any inroads with regards to what these practices entail to each specific, individual user. For example, a retweet might indicate an expression of support for one user, while others may have ascribed different or even fluctuating meaning to this or any of the other practices discussed above (for further discussion of these issues, please refer to Lomborg and Bechmann, 2014; Driscoll and Walker, 2014). Admittedly, the aggregated view championed here is not able to delve into these intricacies. The approach employed is nevertheless useful, as it provides an overview of the feedback given – feedback that can play important an important part in determining online ‘virality’ and thus increased attention. These delimitations aside, the argument is made here that the suggested multi-modal view on feedback options can help in securing future analytical efforts involving comparisons with those inevitably impending platforms bound to follow after Twitter and Facebook. As pointed out by Bekafigo and McBride (2013), “while SNS [social network services], even Twitter, may come and go, Internet technology is here to stay” (13). The
proposed typology, then, suggests a focus on the basic functionalities of the services in vogue today – and perhaps also characteristic of those yet to be seen.

**Method**

The online presences of political actors will most certainly change and evolve during the course of an election campaign (see Foot and Schneider, 2006 - although Gibson et al., 2008: appear to disagree on this point), thereby suggesting interesting analytical opportunities of such “platforms that are by design or dysfunction constantly in flux” (Elmer, 2012: 18). Nevertheless, the final stretch of such a quest for votes – the “short campaign” (Aardal et al., 2004) - often defined as the month-long period leading up to election day, is still interesting to study, as it can be assumed to offer up the parties, politicians and perhaps also their respective supporters at the very height of their online abilities (e.g. Vaccari, 2008a; Enli and Skogerbo, 2013). Along this line of reasoning, our analytical efforts are focused on the time period of August 14, 2014 to September 17, 2014. As Election Day took place on September 14th, the prescribed analytical setup allows us to gauge not only the build-up to election, but also some of the electoral aftermath. Given the adopted multi-modal approach, data collection for the previously mentioned time period was undertaken for both Twitter and Facebook. As each platform is characterized by specific characteristics with regards to these endeavors, the subsequent two sections detail the actions taken in both cases.

*Twitter* is often pointed to as a social media platform of a “generally public nature” (Bruns and Highfield, 2013: 671), and while data collection from said service is generally considered to be unproblematic from a purely technical point of view, ethical issues often ensue when the object of study concerns political issues, or other themes that could be
considered as sensitive (Moe and Larsson, 2012). While one could argue that those citizens who choose to interact in some way with political actors on a public web service such as Twitter are not necessarily in need of privacy protection, our current efforts are not directed towards such identification of especially active citizens. As such, the data collected regarding all other actors than the parties were anonymized with precautionary measures in mind.

Twitter data were collected by entering suitable keywords tracking the official accounts of parties into a localized installation of YourTwapperKeeper (Bruns and Highfield, 2013). The service queries the Search and Stream APIs (application programming interface) of Twitter, and while such a non-commercial approach to data collection has potential limitations (Driscoll and Walker, 2014), the comparably limited amount of Twitter use in the Swedish context (Nordicom, 2013; Larsson and Moe, 2013) coupled with our use of delimiting keywords (Morstatter et al., 2013) provides confidence regarding the procuration of a full sample of tweets sent in relation to the parties.

For Facebook, the Netvizz service was employed to facilitate data gathering (Rieder, 2013). The service allows for extraction of post content as well as metadata (such as the date the post was made, number of likes, shares and comments at the time of archiving) regarding each post. Moreover, Netvizz features automatic anonymization – an especially useful feature for our current purposes. With this in mind, the officially endorsed Facebook Pages were gauged for activity (for further discussion regarding the study of Pages, see Gulati and Williams, 2013).

While these rationales for data collection allow for careful scrutiny of activity at the hands of politicians, as well as the reactions to this activity, the results derived from these data
must nevertheless be considered a ‘snapshot’ of the studied accounts as they appeared at the time of data collection (Brugger, 2012). For example, it is entirely possible that parties have removed their posts since these were first offered, or that their supporters have similarly deleted their shares or retweets of posts made. As such, what is presented here is essentially an aggregated view of the Facebook and Twitter experiences of leading political actors (e.g. Lomborg and Bechmann, 2014). The need to “freeze the flow” (Karlsson and Strömbäck, 2010) of online data in order to make it suitable for analysis is nonetheless obvious, but should be assessed with the aforementioned caveats in mind.

With regard to the parties under scrutiny, their characteristics of specific importance for the current study are available in Table One. The table features the parties in descending order based on their share of the votes during the last election prior the one studied here – held in September of 2010.
Table One. Characteristics of Swedish political parties and their social media presences.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party (abbreviation)</th>
<th>2010 Vote %</th>
<th>Twitter Followers*</th>
<th>Facebook Fans*</th>
<th>Incumbent after 2010 elections?</th>
<th>Ideology</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Large (&gt;10%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Democrats (S)</td>
<td>30.7</td>
<td>38 728</td>
<td>79 866</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Left</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative Party (M)</td>
<td>30.1</td>
<td>32 133</td>
<td>40 374</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Right</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium (4-9.9%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental Party (Mp)</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>18 090</td>
<td>45 295</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Environmentalist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal Party (Fp)</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>17 666</td>
<td>9 881</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre Party (C)</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>17 746</td>
<td>12 327</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden Democrats (Sd)</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>13 008</td>
<td>85 250</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Populist Right</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left Party (V)</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>30 483</td>
<td>40 456</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Left</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian Democrats (Kd)</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>14 704</td>
<td>6 158</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Right</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small (&lt;4%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pirate Party (Pp)</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>38 795</td>
<td>84 218</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feminist Initiative (Fi)</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>25 537</td>
<td>108 270</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Left</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Followers and Fans at the start of the studied time period, August 14th, 2014

** New party leader since last election

While all political parties are indeed present on both services, their base of fans and followers vary considerably. With our current focus on party size in mind, it is worth...
noticing that the two of the smallest parties in terms of vote percentage from the 2010 elections are in the lead when it comes to Twitter followers (Pirate Party) and Facebook Fans (Feminist Initiative). These characteristics, then, serve as backdrops for the results as presented in the subsequent section.

Results

The first research question concerned the activities undertaken by the political parties themselves. In order to provide an overarching view of these practices, Figure Two presents a clustered bar chart detailing the activities undertaken by the party accounts on Facebook and Twitter respectively.
Figure Two. Total amount of posts and tweets provided by parties on Facebook (black bars) and Twitter (white bars) during the studied period. Presented in order based on votes received during the 2010 elections (see Table One).

The predominance of white bars in Figure Two suggest the prevalence of Twitter use over Facebook use at the hands of those supposedly responsible for the party accounts on both services. Interestingly, this pattern of use appears to hold true also for all parties, while the reported differences must be considered rather small in a few cases. Consider, for example, the results provided regarding the activity undertaken by the Pirate Party (Pp; N of Facebook posts = 167, N of tweets = 169) or the Sweden Democrats (Sd; N of Facebook posts = 46, N of tweets = 83) – both parties featured in Figure Two with bars indicating lower degrees of activity.
Conversely, for those parties exhibiting high degrees of activity, two such actors emerge as particularly fervent. First, the data presented in the Figure suggest especially high level of activity for the Feminist Initiative Party (Fi), who at the time of election – as well as after the election, one might add – were not seated in parliament. The results indicate that this party took the lead in terms of activity on both platforms (N of Facebook posts = 251, N of tweets = 1610). The second most active party – at least in terms of Twitter use - are the Social Democrats (S; N of Facebook posts = 63, N of tweets = 1043). While their presence on Facebook is diminished by several other actors identified in Figure Two (e.g. Fp = 246 or Pp = 167), the activity on Twitter undertaken by the Social Democrats is surpassed only by the Feminist Initiative.

Looking a bit more closely at the Twitter activity of these two parties, they appear to share a similar approach to this particular service. To a certain extent, their adamant employment of Twitter can be explained by their tendency to utilize content provided by their respective supporters to higher degrees than their competitors. In accordance with the terminology provided previously, it would appear that Fi and S alike are more willing to redistribute content originally tweeted by others. However, some differences can be discerned in the apparent strategy employed by each of these two party for retweeting practices. For the Feminist Initiative Party, these redistributed messages tend to carry themes of user-generated support, such as first-time voters airing their encouragement for the party, after which they are often retweeted by the party account itself – and sometimes also approached with an @mention of thanks penned by one of the party spokespersons. While such tendencies can be perceived also in the tweets sent from the Social Democratic Twitter account, the overall picture here is one of followers reacting to content provided by the party account – after which the party account then performs what could be labeled to as a
‘looping’ of this reaction by retweeting it. While this type of tweeting behavior is indeed criticized by some of the followers through @mentions along the lines of ‘spamming the feed’, this does not appear to have had an impact on those operating the account at hand. Indeed, this conduct on behalf of the Social Democratic account appears to permeate throughout the studied period – especially in conjunction with releases of party commercials.

While the results presented in Figure Two provide us with important information regarding the use levels of Swedish political parties, they convey very little detail about the types of feedback received resulting from these activities. With our second research question in mind, Figures Three and Four details the averages of the different types of feedback options described earlier for Facebook and Twitter respectively. For these Figures, means and standard deviations are reported rather than medians in order to provide what was deemed a more suitable representation of the sometimes rather small levels of engagement.
The results presented in Figure Three suggest a linear tendency among the represented parties – meaning here that as the average statistic for the redistributive type of feedback for Facebook (shares) increase, so does also that same statistic for interactive feedback (comments). Given the sizes of the nodes and their corresponding labels, this tendency of increasing averages as we move diagonally from the downward left corner to the upward...
right can be discerned also here. Indeed, correlation analyses using Spearman’s Rho proved correlations between all three involved variables to be significant (p =<.000 for all correlations) and comparably strong with Rho varying between .779 and .871 for all correlations (interpretative guidelines for correlation strength suggested by Hair, 2010).

With this in mind, it would appear that while the Social Democrats – marked as ‘S’ in the Figure – only amassed the fourth highest amount of ‘Facebook fans’ on the service at hand (see Table One), these fans appear to have put in quite an effort to make the specified account visible. This seems especially true in terms of Shares (M = 547, Std. dev. = 442) and Likes (M = 6162, Std. dev. = 5128), where high standard deviations nevertheless suggest a considerable spread around the reported means. Similar claims appear as valid for the average number of comments received (M = 368, Std. dev = 323). Focusing on the content provided through the account, the most Liked (N of Likes = 28810) post offered by the Social Democrats is coincidentally also the most commented (N of Comments = 2361). This post, penned late election night, features party leader Stefan Löfven giving thanks to party supporters and staffers after the party had been declared victorious1. The most shared content from the Social Democratic account is posted on August 27th – the very same day that advance voting possibilities opened for the upcoming election. Consequently, this post urges supporters to vote in advance and to share the post itself in order to spread the message about this possibility2.

This tendency of popularity of posts that encourage supporters to vote and to share this encouragement using the redistributive functionality of Facebook is visible also for other parties, such as the Conservatives (M) and the Environmental Party (Mp), although not for

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1 Available at [https://www.facebook.com/8040892957/posts/10152754279777958 - accessed October 5, 2014.]
the other stand-out party as visible in Figure Three – the right-wing populist Sweden Democrats. Here, the most shared as well as the most commented post is offered on September 4th and features sneak premiere of an election commercial to be broadcast on Swedish commercial television the following day. Their most successful post in terms of Likes (N of Likes = 9648) was made available on August 20th and deals with the controversy started when the party wanted to place their admittedly polarizing political advertisements on Stockholm public transport buses.

As for those parties who did not emerge as comparably successful in gaining traction on Facebook, a particularly interesting case to focus on here could be the Feminist Initiative. As shown in Table One, while Fi had succeeded to amass the largest quantity of Facebook fans at the beginning of the studied period, the party did not reach a similar level of success in activating these as well as other users – given the comparably limited levels of feedback received by the party as shown in Figure Three. Looking more closely at the posts provided by the party at hand that did reach a larger audience through Facebook sharing, these are largely focused on voting mobilization efforts centering on their tentative role in the balance of parliamentary power between the left- and right hand side in Swedish government.

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Moving on to consider the feedback received on Twitter, while the axes and nodes in Figure Four indicate the same features as those in Figure Three, the scales have shifted to the diminutive – a reflection of the comparably large spread and popularity of Facebook in comparison to the service at hand. With these changes in mind, we can nevertheless compare the relative placements and sizes of the visible nodes in order to say something...
about what parties appeared as more or less successful in the Swedish ‘Twittersphere’ leading up to the 2014 elections. In further comparison with Figure Three, the linear tendency detailed earlier is visible also here. However, Correlation analyses for the three variables involved resulted in significant, but comparably weaker Spearman’s Rho values than reported for the previous Figure (p=<.000, Rho between .408 and .721 for all correlations). While these results indicate a similar ‘rich-get-richer’-type effect to the one seen in Figure Three, this relationship must be considered as weaker for Twitter than for Facebook.

Similarly to the activity charted on Facebook, the Sweden Democrats (Sd) emerge as particularly successful on Twitter as well - in terms of gaining comparably high average amounts of retweets (M = 24, Std. dev. = 29), @mentions (M = 9, Std. dev. = 8) as well as favorites (M = 33, Std. dev. = 41) per tweet sent. Again, we must pay attention to the sizeable standard deviations, indicating considerable spread around the reported means. Nevertheless, the popularity of the Twitter account under scrutiny cannot be denied. As for the content provided by the party, their most popular tweets in terms of redistribution are seemingly authored by the party leader, Jimmie Åkesson, and centered on utterances of critique: for instance against the tabloid newspaper Expressen (N of Shares = 157) or, more generally, against the immigration policies favored by their political competitors6.

While the Sweden Democrats were paired with the Social Democrats as being the two most successful parties on Facebook, for Twitter the latter party has a new competitor, specifically the other ‘catch-all’ party in Swedish politics – the Conservatives (M). This account featured statistics largely on par with the aforementioned; retweets (M = 29, Std.

6 Available at [https://twitter.com/jimmieakesson/status/511141050392776704](https://twitter.com/jimmieakesson/status/511141050392776704) or [https://twitter.com/jimmieakesson/status/502024122717962240](https://twitter.com/jimmieakesson/status/502024122717962240) - both accessed October 4, 2014.
dev. = 39), @mentions (M = 6, Std. dev. = 6) and favorites (M = 27, Std. dev. = 48). As for the types of tweets sent by this party that gained the most traction in terms of Redistribution, these involve a retweet that was originally sent by well-known Swedish comedian Jonas Gardell, suggesting that some of the recruitment choices of the Social Democrats were less than original (N of retweets = 430). Another example is taken from Election Day, where the party calls on supporters to retweet the message at hand if they had voted for the Conservatives – supposedly a last-minute attempt to rally the forces (N of retweets = 229)\textsuperscript{7}.

As shown in Table One, the Social Democrats and the Pirate Party had managed to leverage the highest amount of Twitter followers going into the final month-long stretch leading up to September 14\textsuperscript{th} (38728 and 38795 followers respectively). However, such comparably large followings appear to have had limited effects on the popularity of the parties as detailed in Figure Four. While the Pirate Party appears as slightly more successful in terms of gaining feedback on Twitter rather than on Facebook, the Social Democrats and the Conservatives almost appear to have switched places when we compare Figures Three and Four. While these Figures are arguably measuring these tendencies at different scales, the differences regarding the ways in which the two main parties in Swedish politics fare on the services under scrutiny here are nevertheless interesting. These, and other issues that emerged from the analyses are discussed in the following and final section of the paper.

**Discussion**

While large amount of followers or fans on the services studied might be considered a prerequisite for viral success, the results presented in this study indicates that amassing a comparably large fan base does not necessarily translate to attention gained on Facebook or

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\textsuperscript{7} Available at [https://twitter.com/Jonas_Gardell/status/500667463680688128](https://twitter.com/Jonas_Gardell/status/500667463680688128) - accessed October 4, 2014.
Twitter respectively. This becomes clear when comparing the data regarding party fans and followers (as provided in Table One) to the spread each party enjoyed on both services. As such, while size – in terms of vote percentage – appears as important, other factors emerge as relevant as well.

Perhaps such factors can be assessed further by focusing first on the results presented in Figure Two. The dominance of Twitter over Facebook as employed by the parties is clearly felt here. This result could be seen as a reflection of supposedly different publishing logics for the two platforms, or based on prioritizations internal to the party organizations beyond the grasp of the current approach. However, given the popularity of Facebook over Twitter in the population at larger, this finding could also be interpreted as suggesting a communicative ‘mismatch’ of sorts between citizens and those elected to govern them (Larsson and Kalsnes, 2014). Indeed, Swedish Twitter users have been pointed to as societal elites – a classification that might make these users especially attractive for political parties on the campaign trail to relate to (Larsson and Moe, 2013). While there are discrepancies, the results presented here suggest the priorities of Swedish political parties appear to lie on reaching out societal elites on Twitter rather than to the more ‘Average Joe’ type citizen one would find on Facebook.

Moreover for Twitter, while both the Social Democrats and the Feminist Initiative make extensive use of content originally provided by their respective supporters, the former of these parties does so in what was previously described as a ‘looping’ fashion. Essentially, the people operating the Social Democrat account engage in retweeting the retweets sent by other users carrying their original content. In comparison, the Feminist Initiative Party appears as more encompassing of user content – retweeting the messages sent by supporters
to a higher degree than any other party, largely avoiding the aforementioned ‘looping’ tactic. For the Feminist Initiative Party, this could be taken as signaling trust in their supporters, and a willingness to move beyond a supposed catalogue of ready-made messages and narratives to be distributed through a variety of communication channels at specified times. Moreover, this rhymes well the general ‘social movement’-type framing that the party maintains in popular media coverage, and which to some extent forms the basis of the party organization. By allowing supporter content to be broadcast as official party messages, The Feminist Initiative Party could be said to strengthen the bonds with their Twitter followers.

Be that as it may – when one compares how the parties fared in terms of gaining redistributive, interactive and acknowledging feedback on the two services under scrutiny, the right-wing populist Sweden Democrats emerge as comparably successful on both Facebook and Twitter. This result aligns itself with previous indicators of online prowess at the hands of right-wing parties, suggesting a tendency for ideologically marginalized parties to gain more traction in novel media spheres than in the coverage curated by established media actors (Lorentzen, 2014, Larsson, 2014). As suggested by Gil de Zúñiga et al (2010), “the politically cynical or disenfranchised may be using the Internet to express their concerns” (2010: 46) – a claim that – with these results in mind – seems particularly valid in the Swedish context as studied here. However, the Sweden Democrats do face competition in this regard – by the two largest parties in the Swedish political system. For Facebook, the Social Democrats emerge as the most successful in terms of gaining feedback. For Twitter, the Conservatives are clearly giving the Sweden Democrats a match and appear as more successful in relation to two out of the three types of feedback detailed previously. Indeed, sizeable parties prevail over their smaller competitors, and as the results of the 2014 election found the Sweden Democrats to emerge as the third largest party, following the two
previously mentioned parties, this holds true also in an ‘after-the-fact’ sense.

Again, size does matter, but the differences discerned between the two largest parties are interesting beyond the factor of vote percentage. As the Conservatives appear to have performed better on Twitter, it is tempting to relate this to the aforementioned elite user profile that is often used to describe the service at hand. Conversely, the Social Democrats fared better on Facebook – a social media platform with a broader, less urban user base. Indeed, based on the results presented here, we cannot make any firm claims regarding such socio-demographic matters of user profiles and preferences. We can, however, note a tendency for social media success at the hands of these two parties in particular to be structured in a way that would appear to suggest such demarcations. Ideally, the findings presented here can serve as a starting point for future research, providing further insights into these matters by looking into the demographics of those active in providing feedback on the platforms at hand.

Beyond discussions of party size and the apparent consequences thereof, it is important to note that not all feedback received is of the pleasant variety. While the study at hand has shown what political parties succeeded in gaining attention on Twitter and Facebook, the purpose of the study and the research design employed allows us to say very little about the specific contents of the tweets and posts placed under scrutiny – save for the examples provided earlier. With regards to content, consider, for example, the redistributive type of feedback as described in Figure One. From a technical point of view, a share on Facebook or a retweet on Twitter does indeed help leverage the amount of attention given to the actor on the receiving end of the redistribution, so to speak. However, those active in redistributing the messages originally provided by the parties can annotate or amend their retweets or
shares to contain not necessarily support, but criticism, and in some cases *ad hominem* attacks or hate speech. For the Feminist Initiative Party, a closer look at the data suggests that this sometimes takes the form of what must be considered as vicious misogynic utterances. As for the Sweden Democrats, while they are certainly attacked – often in the form of accusations of racist policy suggestions – scrutiny of the conversations taking place indicate that they appear to enjoy a veritable army of digital foot soldiers that are ready to question or even counterattack those who provide criticism of the party. This again falls in line with the aforementioned tendency for right-wing parties to enjoy online popularity. Regardless of critical framings or not, we can expect the act of redistributing on the platforms studied to have a certain impact on visibility – and virality.

On a concluding note, we might find it suitable to return to the question posed in a previous chapter. Does size matter? The sizeable parties – the Social Democrats and the Conservatives – might not be at the very top of actual use of the services, but they certainly enjoy that type of privileged position when it comes to the amount of feedback received in relation to their messages as sent on both services. On the other hand, controversial parties – such as the Sweden Democrats – can be described as marginalized not in terms of size, but in terms of ideology – their perspectives on immigration policy have largely made it difficult for them to exercise message control when appearing in established news media. In this situation, the results presented here suggest that parties marginalized in this way might find it fruitful to provide information and to rally their forces through a channel they themselves control – for example, in the way that the Sweden Democrats provided a link to their political advertisement on the day before its television premiere. This gives them control – but it is uncertain to what degree this activity actually has an effect on the established media agenda, or on the minds of the undecided voter. In sum, then, this study found that larger
parties see their size reflected also in their online success. Controversial parties – like the Sweden Democrats – also gain attention in this regard. However, because of their status as the third largest party in terms of vote share after the 2014 election, it is tempting to side with those who claim that party size is indeed of the utmost importance not only for success at the ballots – but also for gaining attention on social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter.

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