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Le tweet stratégique: Use of Twitter as a PR tool by French politicians



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ABSTRACT

This study, adopting a qualitative approach to political communication, looks in depth at the way Twitter is used as a PR tool by five French politicians. It suggests that the microblogging service plays a specific role in allowing them to monitor public opinion and current affairs, to interact with voters, journalists, stakeholders and other politicians and to disseminate information. The way politicians use Twitter is influenced by concerns of impression management (content and style of tweets), and also various institutional, political and social/symbolic limits, which contribute to reveal tensions between the field of French politics and the way it has shaped traditional political communication practises on the one hand, and the technical and social characteristics associated with Twitter on the other. While these characteristics may be factors encouraging politicians to adopt the microblogging platform as a PR tool, they also constitute challenges in terms of PR.

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1. Introduction

In the course of the past five to six years, Twitter has rapidly imposed itself as one of the major digital PR tools used by politicians in many countries around the world. France is no exception, with around 60% of French MPs active on Twitter during the last three months of 2013, according to a commercial study (Baron, 2014).¹ The French general public has been somewhat slower in adopting the social media platform: the same study estimates that somewhere around 10% of the French population currently use it. Yet Twitter is becoming progressively more widely-known in France too, partly through the influence of politicians and journalists as early adopters, and indeed this has also been the case in several other countries (Grant, Moon, & Busby Grant, 2010). Twitter has played a role in several political scandals taken up by the mainstream media in France, such as the controversial tweet sent by the country's First Lady, Valérie Trierweiler, during the 2012 French general election campaign (*infra*).

Today, there is considerable pressure on politicians in France to create a Twitter account (Brachotte & Frame, 2011), yet the way they subsequently use the tool raises many questions in terms of strategic PR and image management. Indeed, PR specialists are quick to stress that Twitter can only be a valuable tool if used as part of a global PR strategy (Evans, Twomey, & Talan, 2011; Grunig, 2009). Hwang suggests that strategic use of the tool by CEOs can contribute to improving perceptions of leadership and positively influence the image of the corporations they represent (Hwang, 2012). Can leading political

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¹ According to the study carried out by Reputation Management Consultancy Agency Augure (www.augure.com) and published in April 2014, 346 out of 577 MPs were had been active on Twitter at least once in the 30 days prior to the beginning of the study. A further 62 "inactive" accounts were recorded, placing the total number of MPs with accounts at 408.

figures use Twitter to obtain similar goals? Much research carried out into the kinds of information tweeted by politicians, in various countries, suggests that the tool is often used by politicians principally for self-promotion, in the traditional top-down style of political communication (Grant et al., 2010; Larsson & Kalsnes, 2014). By contrast, the platform is only rarely used to exchange information, debate or give insights into political processes (Golbeck, Grimes, & Rogers, 2010; Lawless, 2012; Vergeer & Hermans, 2013). However, some authors point have found evidence of differing styles of Twitter use among politicians, depending on their profile (Dang-Anh, Einspänner, & Thimm, 2012; Jackson & Lilleker, 2011; Sæbø, 2011) and others have proposed evidence of maturing patterns of usage (Grant et al., 2010) and of the influence of a small political elite within a national Twittersphere (Ausserhofer & Maireder, 2013).

In many countries, and notably in the UK and US, Twitter has been used by politicians to s(t)imulate proximity by conveying details from the private sphere (Frame & Brachotte, 2013; Frame, 2012; Jackson & Lilleker, 2009). While this has been analysed as contributing to a broader trend towards the personalisation of politics (Stanyer, 2013), it is interestingly not the case in France, where a stricter division between public and private can be observed in political PR in general, including that on social media (Brachotte & Frame, 2011). In the light of this observation, further qualitative research was carried out by the authors in order to gain insights into the specific ways French politicians were using Twitter as a strategic PR tool.

This paper draws on the results of this qualitative research, consisting in a series of five semi-directive interviews conducted with female French politicians active on the national level (MPs and senators), including current and ex-ministers from across the political spectrum.² The politicians interviewed were encouraged to discuss in-depth their personal practises and representations of Twitter as a political PR tool, through a range of questions including the following topics: motivation of use, modes of access, time spent reading and writing, profile information, followers, best practises, evolutions in usage, evolutions in working practises, individual vs. team-run accounts, global social media strategy, public vs. private spheres, limits and resistance. The paper will draw on the declared and observed practises of the politicians, to analyse the way Twitter is being used as a political PR tool.

2. Methodology

For the purposes of this qualitative research, politicians were selected on the basis of several factors: (a) the fact they had an active account on Twitter, (b) their political profile and relative importance on the French national political scene, (c) the researchers' capacity to obtain a contact with them and (d) their willingness to participate in the study. Out of a total of twenty politicians contacted, five accepted to be interviewed, in person, by telephone or by Skype. These were:

- Isabelle Attard: MP for *Calvados* (Normandy) for the “*Europe Ecologie – Les Verts*” ecologist party.³
- Roselyne Bachelot: Health and Sports Minister and later Minister for Social Affairs under the presidency of Nicolas Sarkozy. Previously Minister for Social Cohesion, Roselyne Bachelot ended her 35-year political career in 2012, having lost her seat in the general elections, and resumed her previous career in journalism.
- Michèle Delaunay: Socialist MP for *Gironde* and Minister for the Elderly under the presidency of François Hollande from May 2012 to March 2014.⁴
- Catherine Morin-Desailly: Member of the “New Centre” party and Senator for the *Haute Normandie* area.
- Safia Otokoré: Vice-President of the Regional Council of Burgundy and chief communications advisor to Pierre Moscovici, Minister of Finance under the presidency of François Hollande.

The interviews were conducted between May 2013 and January 2014, each one lasting between 30 min and one and a quarter hours. Transcripts were subsequently submitted to the interviewees for validation. Table 1 resumes the main characteristics of the interviewees' Twitter accounts on the date of their respective interviews, including varying levels of activity on Twitter (measured in the number of tweets sent in the 30 days prior to the interview).⁵

Despite their varying levels of experience and activity on Twitter, the politicians interviewed clearly do not constitute a representative sample of the population studied, even if this were limited to the 150 female members of parliament. However, the objective of this qualitative research is not to seek to describe or characterise practises within the population as a whole, but rather to gain in-depth insights into the ways in which individual politicians seek to make use of the communication tool, their representations of it and of the “media logic” (Schulz, 2004) at work.

² This research is part of a wider editorial project being carried out by the authors into the use of Twitter as a communication tool by female politicians and political journalists in France. Among the politicians selected for interviewed were representatives of the governing left-wing *Parti Socialiste*; the large right-wing party which had governed France until 2012 under Nicolas Sarkozy, *Union pour un Mouvement Populaire*; the small group of centre-right formations making up the *Union pour la Démocratie Française*; and the ecologist/Green Party group represented by *Europe Ecologie – Les Verts*.

³ In December 2013, Ms Attard resigned from *EELV* to become first serving Member of Parliament to join the new left-wing political formation named “*Nouvelle Donne*”.

⁴ As Minister, Michèle Delaunay set up a specific Ministerial Twitter account, run principally by her team. The account included in this study is her “personal” account, set up before she became Minister and continued afterwards.

⁵ Writing tweets is of course only part of the activity on Twitter, however, since politicians may spend much more time reading than writing tweets (cf. *infra*).

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