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► **To cite this version:**

Marius Rohde Johannessen. Genres of Participation in Social Networking Systems: A Study of the 2013 Norwegian Parliamentary Election. 6th International Conference on Electronic Participation (ePart), Sep 2014, Dublin, Ireland. pp.26-37, 10.1007/978-3-662-44914-1\_3. hal-01396949

**HAL Id: hal-01396949**

**<https://inria.hal.science/hal-01396949v1>**

Submitted on 15 Nov 2016

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# Genres of participation in social networking systems: A study of the 2013 Norwegian parliamentary election

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**Abstract.** Online campaigning has been on the agenda of Norwegian political parties since 2001. In 2007, there were some early attempts at online campaigning through social networking systems (SNS) during the municipal elections. 2009 was the first time SNS' were used for campaigning on a national level by all the political parties represented in parliament. This study follows up an earlier study of the 2009 election by examining the communication genres being used by Norwegian political parties in the 2013 parliamentary election. The 2009 study concluded that a genre system for online campaigning was emerging in SNS', and presented an overview of this system. This paper shows that the genre system is slowly moving towards an established system, and that while still not fully sorted out, previous issues, such as a lack of two-way communication, is being addressed by the parties. The study concludes that campaigning in SNS' is slowly moving more and more towards the objectives of politics 2.0.

**Keywords:** eParticipation, online campaigning, social networking systems, genre theory, Norway

## 1 Introduction

Online campaigning has been on the agenda for Norwegian political parties since the parliamentary election in 2001. Back then the Internet played a marginal role, but it was expected that this would change in coming election campaigns [1]. In 2007 there were some initial attempts at campaigning through social media, and Barack Obama's successful 2008 campaign served as an inspiration for the 2009 parliamentary election [2].

The reason for this interest in moving towards digital media can be found in the Norwegian research project power and democracy, which conducted a study of the state of democracy in Norway between 1998 and 2003. One of the main conclusions of the study was that representative democracy is in decline. Citizens are no longer loyal to one political party, or participating in broad social movements such as labour unions. Citizens instead move from one party to the next, one issue to the other. Sin-

gle issues have become more important than party politics. This means that power is slowly moving from the parliament towards lobbying and non-governmental organizations (NGO's) [3]. Norwegian politicians are signalling that they want more citizen dialogue and user-involvement in the political process [4], and they are increasingly attempting to achieve this through SNS' and other digital communication channels in order to reach out and communicate directly with voters [5]. The purpose of this paper is to revisit the SNS communicative strategies of Norwegian political parties. In the 2009 parliamentary election there was evidence of an emerging system of genres [6] for political communication, and the political parties reported that their SNS efforts would only increase with time. This paper thus aims to compare the findings from the elections in 2009 and 2013, in order to examine if the genre system emerging in 2009 has changed significantly between the two elections, and to discover if SNS' are being used in line with the principles of online politics as outlined by Chadwick and Howard [7].

The rest of the paper is structured as follows: Section two provides an overview of related research, specifically on the topics of social networking and online campaigning. Section three presents the research approach of the study, and sections four and five present the findings and conclusions with some possible directions for future research.

## **2 Related research**

Democracy can be conceptualized in a number of ways, and is practiced differently in different contexts [8]. Most of these conceptualisations involve some sort of interaction between citizens and government. Communication between citizens and the politicians elected to rule is considered a necessity in the democratic process, and government generally recognise the value of participation [9, 10]. While the value of citizen participation is recognized both in academia and government, recent political trends show that political engagement is decreasing. Across the western world fewer people are members of a political party [11] or vote in elections [12]. Governments rely more on expert assessment [13] and power moves towards markets and the legal system [14]. Partly as a consequence of this, the past decade has seen a number of technologically driven participation projects, as there are indications that social media presence increases participation [15].

### **2.1 Online campaigning in SNS: Towards politics 2.0**

Social Networking Services (SNS') are web-based services where users can 1) create and maintain a public or private profile. 2) create a list of other users they are connected to, and 3) see their own and others' contact lists [16]. The most popular SNSs are those that focus on user-generated content, participation, openness and network effects [17]. Social networking is not mainly about technology, but about covering people's needs for access to and sharing of information, collaboration and

the creation of identity and self. As such, SNS should be treated more as a cultural than technological phenomenon [18]. To reap the benefits of SNS, owners of information need to open their data, think in terms of collaborative production of ideas and content, and to share ideas with others in order to create better information [19].

Political campaigning is all about convincing the public that your party has the best policy. The election campaign has a very big influence on the outcome of the parliamentary election. More than 40 % of Norwegian voters wait until the final weeks of the campaign before deciding who gets their vote, and many change their mind several times during the campaign [20]. Younger voters are more likely to cast their vote differently from one election to the next [21]. When the Norwegian newspapers became politically independent, political parties lost the power to decide what should be on the public agenda [3]. The media has taken over this role, and are trying to write about the things they believe voters are concerned about [3, 21]. Political parties in campaign mode are constantly working to move citizens towards those media channels controlled by the parties, where SNS' along with party and candidate web sites are among the most important [5]. SNS' play an important part in what has been called the *hybridised media system*, where traditional and new media are both reliant upon each other [22], and thus SNS' expand the possible modes of election campaigning [23].

Chadwick and Howard [7] introduce the concept of politics 2.0, based on the original conceptualisation of web 2.0 made by O'Reilly [24]. This concept can be used for analysing the media-specific effects of campaigning in SNS', and can function as a guideline for practitioners and as a lens for understanding and evaluating SNS activities. The concept consists of up of 7 themes: 1) *The Internet is a platform for political discourse* where the ability to rapidly respond to events through setting up new web sites or SNS groups is essential. Distributed networks of contributors, online activist campaigns and citizen journalism can create valuable information, which leads to the second theme: 2) *The collective intelligence emergent from political web use*. 3) *The importance of data over particular software and hardware applications* is a theme showing that not only does SNS' provide rich input from citizens, but it is also a source of demographic data about potential voters. 4) *Perpetual experimentalism in the public domain*. This theme shows how SNS' can contribute to more inclusive politics, by taken citizen advice into consideration and by providing a platform where political parties can instantly respond to comments, polls, petitions and media events. 5) *The creation of small scale forms of political engagement*. Data mash-ups such as fix my street, as well as mobile applications where citizens produce data through mobile apps or through documenting issues using mobile cameras allows for low-threshold forms of engagement. This is tied in with the sixth theme 6) *The propagation of political content over multiple applications*. Finally, the seventh theme includes the new interactive features found in SNS' such as multimedia content and hyperlinks: 7) *Rich user experiences on political web sites*. The importance and potential outcomes of interactive content have been discussed in several earlier studies [25-27].

## 2.2 Genre theory

Genre theory can be applied to study the role of communication in social processes, and has been applied to several eParticipation studies [28-31]. Genres evolve over time, in the interplay between institutional practice and the people communicating [32]. Genre theory provides us with a lens for detailed understanding of political communication, beyond the observation of technological functionality [33]. Originally, genres were recognized by having similar form and content, where form refers to physical and linguistic features, and content to themes and topics of the genre [32]. Later, when the Internet became more popular, functionality offered by the medium delivering the genre was added as a third construct [26]. A set of genres used by a given community can be seen as a genre system [6]. The genre system of a community can reveal a “rich and varied array of communicative practices” shaped by community members in response to norms, events, time pressure and media capabilities [33]. Genres are useful for studying SNS’, as the introduction of new media over time often leads to new communication practices which genre theory allows us to map and analyze [30]. By studying communication genres instead of the technology used to communicate, we can discover how communication changes and evolves over time [33], and by including the technological functionality of the medium the genre is enacted within, we can better understand the interplay between the social and the technical [26].

Genres can be defined by examining form, functionality and content, by using the 5w1h-method. By asking *where*, *why*, *when*, *who*, *what* and *how*, we can uncover the purpose, contents, placement in time, location, participants, structure and medium for communication [6, 34]: *Where* tells us where the communication takes place, the medium being used, or the physical location. *Why* explains the purpose of the genre, as understood by those using it. *When* refers to the time where communication takes place. For example, the “job application” genre is enacted when applying for a job, and needs to be in by a set date. *Who* defines the actors involved in communication, the sender and receiver of the genre. *What* is the content of the genre, and defines what is being communicated, and any relations to other genres. Finally, *How* describes the technical needs for delivery of the genre, for example which medium is being used, or any other technical necessities.

## 3 Research approach

The objective of this paper is to examine if the genre system emerging in 2009 has changed significantly between 2009 and 2013, and to discover if SNS’ are being used in line with the principles of politics 2.0. The study was conducted using a qualitative, interpretive approach. Data for the 2009 study was collected through semi-structured interviews with representatives from the seven political parties that were represented in the parliament before the election (Socialist Left, Labor, Center Party, Liberals, Christian people’s party, Conservatives and the Progress Party). Five interviews were made face to face, while two of the parties only had time for e-mail inter-

views. All of the interview subjects were hired by their respective parties to work with social networking strategies. The Interviews lasted between 40 and 77 minutes, and were taped and transcribed. In addition, content analysis of the SNS' used by the parties were applied. This made it possible to compare what the information workers said with what their employers, the politicians, were actually doing, and to create an overview of the genre system in SNS political communication. Data was collected between March and May in 2009. The genre systems of 2009 and 2013 are presented following the guidelines from [35].

Data for the 2013 election was collected between June and September 2013, mainly through content analysis of the SNS' used by the seven political parties represented in parliament. In total, 6000 posts and comments were collected and a selection of these was coded using the 5W1H method. When no new genres were identified, the remainders of the posts were quickly scanned to see which genre category they matched. Finally, representatives of the political parties was contacted and asked to verify the interviews from 2009. They were given the summary of the transcripts from 2009 and asked if anything had changed in the time between the two elections.

## 4 Findings

### 4.1 Summary of findings, 2009 election

The interviews made in 2009 identified three objectives for political communication in SNS'. These are dialogue with citizens, contributions from citizens, and involvement in party activities, and are presented in table 1.

	<b>Dialogue</b>	<b>Contribution</b>	<b>Involvement</b>
<b>Why</b>	Involve citizens in debate	Knowledge about citizen concerns	Raise funds. Get people to volunteer
<b>When</b>	Continuous	Election time	Election time
<b>What</b>	Conversation between citizens and politicians	Q&A. Voter stories	Competitions, membership forms, information
<b>Who</b>	Politicians, party members, citizens	Politicians, party members, voters	Voters, sympathizers
<b>Where</b>	SNS, web site	SNS, web site	SNS, web site
<b>How</b>	Encourage dialogue. Open and personal language. Citizen-generated content.	Encourage contributions and questions from voters	Competitions, theme sites, cross-publication

Table 1: Political party objectives for SNS participation

The genres identified in the 2009 SNS' can be analyzed as to which of these "genre objectives" they support (table 2), and this knowledge can be applied by site administrators and politicians in such a way as to facilitate the use of genres which are most likely to lead to the desired objective.

Genre	Producer	User	Medium	Related to
<b>Policy comment</b>	Citizen	Citizen, party	Facebook, blog, Twitter, video	Dialogue, contribution
<b>Call for action</b>	Citizen, party	Citizen	Facebook, Twitter, video	Contribution, involvement
<b>Q&amp;A</b>	Citizen	Party	Facebook, Twitter, blog	Dialogue
<b>Appeal to party</b>	Citizen	Party	Facebook, Twitter, blog	Dialogue, contribution
<b>Greeting</b>	Citizen	Party	Facebook, blog	Dialogue
<b>Personal accounts</b>	Citizen	Party	blog	contribution
<b>Video response</b>	Citizen, party	Citizen, party	YouTube	Contribution

Table 2: Genres identified in 2009 election

Policy comments are comments from citizens on party policy. These come in many forms: Wall or discussion posts on Facebook, in Twitter messages and blog comments. Calls for action mainly originate with the party, but are often distributed through citizens supporting the party making the call. This genre incorporates calls for volunteers, competitions and calls for action in specific cases. Several parties have created Facebook groups for specific parts of their policy. Calls are presented in video, with links to the video posted to Facebook and Twitter. The Q&A genre is perhaps the genre that citizens are least satisfied with. Many questions on Facebook walls remain unanswered, or are answered unsatisfactorily. Some citizens ask why politicians bother having a presence in SNS when they do not engage in conversations with citizens. Appeals to the party are similar to policy comments. The difference is that where policy comments reflect directly on the party's political program, appeals are more specific, asking what the party intends to do with this or that matter. There is some frustration among citizens when these are not answered.

Greeting is an interesting genre. At his birthday, Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg received hundreds of greetings wishing him a happy birthday. In other cases, we see greetings cheering the party on to fight for a specific case. This genre, while not directly political, could be seen as narrowing the gap between politician and citizen, creating a sense of personal attachment between the two. Personal accounts are mainly found in blogs, as response to politicians asking for the stories of individual citizens. The most interesting example is where the minister of health asks for people's stories as input to a major health reform. Video responses from citizens are rare, but some examples exist. These are typically posted as responses to competitions where parties ask citizens to contribute. There are also responses between parties, where video is used in a similar manner to newspaper debates, and responses between politicians belonging to the same party.

The 2009 election showed an emerging genre system for SNS campaigning. However, there were some challenges identified through content analysis. The main challenge was the mismatch between the expectations of citizens and politicians. Citizens expected answers to their questions and input, but this rarely happened. Responses to party calls for input on specific issues received a lot more comments than other politi-

cian-initiated genres, indicating that citizens need to be heard and feel that their input is used for something if they are to participate.

## 4.2 Genre system 2013 election

The responses from the political parties did not indicate any major changes in the strategies compared to their responses in 2009. Their ambition to use SNS for communicating with voters stands fast, and is perhaps formulated even stronger. Google+ and Instagram have entered the mix of services being used, but Facebook remains the most important medium for most of the parties, with Twitter coming second. Blogs are not reported to be much used in 2013, while blogging was a popular activity in 2009.

One major change is in the amount of people following the parties and their leaders, as well as a lot more activity in 2013 compared with 2009. Due to space limitations, table 3 summarises the numbers for Facebook only, as this is by far the most used medium.

Party	2009				2013			
	Voters	Followers	% f/v	Posts	Voters	Followers	% f/v	Posts
Socialist	166 361	1176	0,7 %	111	116 021	13027	11,2 %	565
Labour	949 049	1745	0,18 %	167	874 769	59065	6,7 %	1021
Center	165 006	446	0,27 %	60	155 357	6642	4,2 %	250
Christian	148 748	266	0,17 %	24	158 475	6469	4,08 %	290
Lib.democrats	104 144	1075	1,03 %	100	148 275	12505	8,4 %	546
Conservatives	462 458	1331	0,28 %	194	760 232	26854	3,5 %	928
Progress party	614 717	5835	0,94 %	688	463 560	59980	12,9 %	873

Table 3: Comparison of Facebook activity 2009 and 2013

There are some interesting observations to be made from table 3. First, the number of followers and posts made by followers has increased quite dramatically. While most parties in 2009 had less than 1 % of their voters as followers, in 2009 this had risen to between 3,5 % and 12,9 %, which means that Facebook alone reaches a significant part of the voters for most of the parties. Differences in demographics between voter groups could perhaps explain some of the difference between the parties. Activity was also a lot higher in 2013, with a significant increase in the number of posts. Second, there seems to be little if any correlation between the number of votes received and the increase in followers. The progress party is by far the most popular Facebook party, but also the party with the largest drop in votes. While an in-depth analysis of this is beyond the scope of this paper, these numbers nevertheless indicate that SNS could be more valuable for dialogue rather than as a campaign tool. Finally, the numbers from 2013 seem to confirm an increased focus on person over party. The leaders of the three largest parties had had 349 342 (Labour), 89 411 (conservatives) and 119 261 (Progress party) followers, far more than any of their parties. The politicians' activity seems to reflect this, as they share a lot more "private" pictures from their travels. The prime minister before the election, Jens Stoltenberg, published a



YouTube video where he posed as a taxi driver, talking politics with the people he was chauffeuring. The video received 1.6 million hits and generated a lot of attention in both social and mainstream media.

<b>Genre</b>	<b>Producer</b>	<b>User</b>	<b>Medium</b>	<b>Related to</b>
<b>Policy comment</b>	Citizen	Citizen, party	Facebook, blog, Twitter, video	Dialogue, contribution
<b>Call for action</b>	Citizen, party	Citizen	Facebook, Twitter, video	Contribution, involvement
<b>Q&amp;A</b>	Citizen	Party	Facebook, Twitter, blog	Dialogue
<b>Appeal to party</b>	Citizen	Party	Facebook, Twitter, blog	Dialogue, contribution
<b>Greeting</b>	Citizen	Party	Facebook, blog	Dialogue
<b>Personal accounts</b>	Citizen	Party	blog	contribution
<b>Debate</b>	Citizen, party	Citizen, party	Facebook	Contribution
<b>Support</b>	Citizen	Party	Facebook, Twitter	Dialogue
<b>nonsupport</b>	Citizen	Party	Facebook, Twitter	Dialogue
<b>Link</b>	Citizen, party	Citizen, party	Facebook	Contribution
<b>Disgruntlement</b>	Citizen	Party	Facebook, Twitter	Dialogue

Table 4: Genres identified in 2013 election

Most of the genres from 2009 are still present in 2013, except for the video response genre, which was not very successful in the previous election. Personal accounts are still present, but not as common. Instead, personal experiences are incorporated into other genres, such as debate and policy comments. In addition, several new genres have emerged. While there was little debate in 2009, 2013 introduces this genre. Citizens provide input and other citizens as well as politicians and the party replies. Support and non-support are other new genres, where citizens show they support (“steady course. Four new years of labour”) or not support (“about time someone else takes the wheel”) the party. Following the non-support genre is disgruntlement, where those are unhappy with the a party, usually the ruling ones, will present more or less sarcastic comments about the party and attribute a range of unpleasant comments about the party and its politicians. Finally, the link genre simply consists of links to news articles and other sources. This is often accompanied by a short statement (“Do something about this, please!”) or question (“Why is this allowed/not allowed?”). Linking to content to support a position shows the richness of digital communication, and the easy by which relevant information can made available to people.

In summary, comparisons of the data from the two elections show that we are moving towards an increasingly rich genre system for political communication. While citizens in 2009 would complain about nonresponsive politicians, this is much less of an issue in 2013. The parties ask for input on a wide range of policy issues, and receive hundreds of replies to issues that people care about the most. This post, from the newly elected government, illustrates the change: “Thank you, everyone who took the time to comment on the government’s budget. We have sent all your comments to the PM. Have a lovely weekend”. Attached to the post was a picture of the Prime minister

holding a sign with a Facebook like button and the text “comments from Facebook”. After a few minutes, there were several comments praising the party for listening to its voters.

One challenge which still remains is that the language use within the genres is yet to be consolidated. While traditional channels for citizen and organisational input has relied on a formal language and a set format, citizens providing input through SNS do so with a language ranging from highly informal, with lots of typing errors, exclamation marks and capital letters to the formal language more common in political communication. This can lead to a re-definition of what should be considered “valuable” input by politicians, similar to the argument made by for example Graham [36] .

### 4.3 Towards politics 2.0?

The genre systems found in the two election campaigns show that we are approaching what can be called “politics 2.0”. Several of the seven themes identified by Chadwick and Howard [7] are relevant in this context.

The increase in numbers of both followers and interactions, and the nature of these interactions clearly shows that the Internet and SNS’ are becoming a *platform for political discourse*. Political parties have also become a lot better at replying quickly to comments, which further adds to this impression. As for the theme *collective intelligence*, the tone and style of posts made by citizens show that a voice is provided to those who are not usually seen as contributors to public debate. This could indicate that our collective intelligence is extended to those who are not otherwise included in the political process. The theme *perpetual experimentalism in the public domain* shows how SNS’ can contribute to more inclusive politics through citizen advice and instant responses. While this theme covers a lot more than the genre and content analysis of this paper, there are indications that this is happening. Parties respond to comments and questions from citizens, and a lot of the posts made by parties are in response to current media events. The theme *small scale form of political engagement* is only present to a limited degree, and was actually more relevant in 2009 with the video response genre. In 2013, there are a few examples related to the use of camera phones, and there have been contests where open government data have been used for creating mash-ups in other contexts not relevant for campaigning. The sixth theme, *propagation of political content over multiple applications*, is very much present, as all of the political parties spread the same types of content across all of their SNS presences. This helps to draw users to content posted on the party’s own web site, which makes up a high percentage of the posts made by parties. The final theme, *rich user experiences*, is becoming increasingly visible, and has improved markedly between 2009 and 2013. In 2009, most parties were criticised for posting pamphlets, newsletters and one-way communication, in 2013 all of them present multimedia-rich and interactive content, responding to current issues. When the Socialist party had poor results in the polls, they started their “I vote socialist because...”-case, where

politicians and sympathisers made posters citing their reasons for voting and uploaded pictures of themselves to Facebook and Twitter. Info graphics presenting specific policy areas are common, as are pictures and video from various events and links to content posted elsewhere. All in all, these themes contribute towards making politics more personalised, providing access to content and information and could contribute towards a renewal of political interest.

## 5 Conclusion

Norwegian political parties have used the Internet in election campaigns since 2001, but SNS was first introduced in 2007. The 2009 election was the first time Norwegian parties were expected to really go in for SNS as a campaign tool. A genre system emerged in 2009, and in 2013 the genre system used in SNS' political communication had matured significantly, and the number of users and contributors has increased greatly. The ways in which SNS' are used are moving us towards "politics 2.0", but still further research is needed. Social network analysis could be applied to examine more in-depth how communication flows in SNS', and while genre analysis provides insights into how citizens and politicians communicate, there is still a need to combine this with a more holistic content analysis to fully examine the dynamics of social networks. Finally, on- and offline data should be compared to examine for example if the higher voter turnout of the 2013 election can be attributed to SNS', or if there are other more important deciding factors. Nevertheless, this study clearly shows that political communication in SNS's is contributing to the political parties' election campaign tool box.

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