Second thoughts on digital first

Exploring the development of election campaigning among Swedish political parties, 2010–2022

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ABSTRACT

This article offers a longitudinal perspective on communications during election campaigns from a political-party perspective, where strategic considerations about digital media are compared across time. Our analysis is grounded on the concepts of hybridisation and data-driven campaigning, where digital technology tends to play a central role without replacing all traditional campaign features. Empirically, the study is based on a longitudinal analysis of four election campaigns in Sweden during 2010–2022. The analysis shows that Swedish political parties have gradually integrated digital campaign features in their structure and strategy. The process is not linear, but rather back and forth, as party perceptions of the importance of communication channels vary across time. The results imply a development where all parties, regardless of size and ideology, are increasingly making rational judgments of which combinations of old and new campaign methods and communication channels are most effective.

KEYWORDS: election campaigns, digital media, hybridisation, data-driven campaigning, Sweden

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Introduction: Digitalisation from a political-party perspective

Studies of the use of digital (particularly social) media during election campaigns have become a rapidly expanding research field in media and communication studies in recent decades.[1] Still, many studies rely on analyses of how citizens use new media platforms for political purposes or content analysis of party and candidate messages and posts on the web. At the same time, less is known regarding how political actors think strategically about how to utilise the new platforms as campaign tools and their considerations when integrating digital and social media with more traditional campaign features (Jungherr, 2016a; Karlsen, 2009; Kreiss et al., 2018; Veneti et al., 2022).

As the digital development of election campaigns is less analysed from an inside political-party perspective, we lack thorough knowledge about the extent to which political parties embrace the new opportunities offered by digital technology, how digital elements are integrated into existing campaign structures and strategies, and which factors are decisive when party campaigning goes digital.

The observations of political-party communication content are relevant as overviews of campaign developments, but they do not provide full information about party considerations for expressing these messages or themes at any given time. This requires a more comprehensive approach where strategies and practices are also analysed, or, as Jungherr (2016a: 374) described in his study of German campaign managers:

> To fully understand the impact of digital tools on campaigns requires that scholars move away from simply analyzing the political content campaigns post online toward a focus on the embeddedness of digital tools in organizational structures and practices.

Previous research has also addressed the need to "further explore some of the systematic drivers and impediments to social media embeddedness in various campaign contexts" (Veneti et al., 2022: 62).

Against this backdrop, this article offers a longitudinal perspective on communications during election campaigns from a political-party perspective, where strategic considerations about digital communication tools and platforms are analysed and compared across time. The analysis is grounded on the concepts of hybridisation and data-driven campaigning, where digital technology tends to play a central role and where digital and traditional distinctive campaign features are assumed to be integrated in line with party strategic purposes.

Our aim is to examine political parties' strategic considerations, including how they assess the importance of digital media in comparison with traditional campaign communication tools. Empirically, the study is based on a longitudinal analysis of four national election campaigns in Sweden during 2010–2022, to investigate to what extent and how digital media play an integral part in political parties' strategies to be as electorally successful as possible. Both pre- and post-election party surveys and personal interviews with campaign managers from all

parties in the parliament have been collected to map how and why traditional and digital campaign communications have been implemented and blended.

The selection of Sweden as a case was motivated by technological, political, and pragmatic reasons. Technologically, Sweden is one of the most digitalised countries in the world in terms of broadband penetration and level of digital and social media use (Internetstiftelsen, 2022). Politically, Sweden is a suitable case because it provides a well-established party system with old and institutionalised parties. Finally, political parties in Sweden are, in comparison with many other countries, relatively open and transparent about campaign strategies and objectives, which allows this study, unlike most other previous research, to be based on empirical analysis of the strategic considerations political parties make rather than a study of what and how parties communicate on social media.

The article is structured as follows: In the next section, we discuss the transformation of election campaigns and introduce the theoretical concepts of hybridisation of campaigning and data-driven campaigning. We then discuss methods and data and the results from the qualitative and quantitative analyses. In the final section, we answer the research questions and offer a discussion about how digitalisation and hybrid, data-driven election campaigns tend to develop over time.

Understanding digital campaigning

Election campaigns in most democracies are in a process of transformation, and previous research largely confirms that they are gradually becoming more digitalised and professionalised (Bolin et al., 2022; Davis, 2019; Grusell & Nord, 2020). Both political parties and individual candidates use a variety of digital tools to target segments of the electorate and reach out more efficiently. The digital trend is further emphasised by the fact that news media election reporting is available on mobile and digital platforms, and social media play a significant role in digital political communications (Tambini, 2018; Taras & Davis, 2022).

Technological development is an important driver of the evolution of how political parties design and execute their election campaigns. From this perspective, there are reasons to expect changes in political parties' campaign strategies to take place both more quickly and more comprehensively (Chadwick & Stromer-Galley, 2016; Russmann, 2022). However, from a party organisational perspective, there are reasons to expect that changes are implemented incrementally and stepwise. It has even famously been argued that parties are simply conservative organisations that are resistant to change (Panebianco, 1988).

In this cross-pressure between rapid digital developments and resilient political-party structures, contemporary election campaigns emerge. It is plausible to believe that campaigning is open to – and sometimes driven by – technological innovations intended to result in electoral successes, but at the same time also careful to preserve previous campaign features that have proven to be important. Thus, it is reasonable to argue that election campaigns today are hybridised to varying degrees of mixtures of older and newer communication tools. Such an idea of hybridisation of campaign practices has grown stronger over time (Chadwick, 2013; Plasser & Plasser, 2002; Schmitt-Beck, 2007).

In the hybridisation model, digital and social media are expected to interact with existing campaign practices rather than replace them (Karlsen, 2009; Schmitt-Beck, 2007). The adaptation of new campaign practices depends on a range of contextual factors, such as the political system, political culture, election laws, media system, and electoral behaviour, just to mention a few. From this perspective, the question is not so much whether digital media replace previous communicative platforms, but what role different digital media play in relation to a wide range of new and old media platforms in the greater political communicative system (Steffan & Venema, 2020).

The entry into such a hybrid and fluid communication environment has also been characterised as a more fundamental structural transformation, or a "new era" of election campaigning, where a key component for understanding contemporary campaigns is that they have become more driven by data and platform convergence considerations (Bossetta & Schmøkel, 2023; Kefford et al., 2022; Römmele & Gibson, 2020). In this perspective, digital technology plays a central role in campaign organisation and operations, voter communications have a more networked approach, there is a more personality-based understanding of the electorate, and campaigns are more internationalised and open for external influence and propaganda (Römmele & Gibson, 2020).

Empirical observations support the idea of data-driven campaigning: A recent comparative study of six countries (Australia, Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, the US, and the UK) found that digital technology was of central importance in all countries for collecting data and tailoring messages to target voter groups. However, true data-driven campaigning was the most distinctive feature only in the American context, while in the other countries, political parties often lacked the capacity to execute data-driven campaigning on a regular basis. Consequently, day-to-day campaign decisions and practices relied on other principles (Kefford et al., 2022). An important recommendation from this comparative study is to move away from a media-centric account of data-driven campaigning and focus less on the impact of new media developments and instead observe more carefully how campaign organisations are adapting to the developments they are confronted with (Kefford et al., 2022: 456).

Another study addressing country-specific conditions for data-driven campaigning concluded that canvassing in German election campaigns seemed to be less data-driven than in the US, mainly because of diverging political culture, privacy laws and regulations, as well as limited party resources in terms of money and number of staff and volunteers (Kruschinski & Haller, 2017).

Longitudinal studies of digital campaigning in Sweden from a political-party perspective are rare; however, studies of single election campaigns indicate that the probability of data-driven campaigning depends more on the resources and size of a party than on party ideology. In the 2014 Swedish elections, the three biggest parties (the Social Democrats, the Moderate Party, and the Sweden Democrats) were most present on social media and paid more attention to new digital technology (Larsson, 2017). A cross-national study of right-wing populist platform strategies in the Nordic countries – examining elections in Denmark,

Finland, Norway, and Sweden during 2017–2019 – found that the Swedish party in the comparison (the Sweden Democrats) held the strongest position on all analysed platforms (Schwartz et al., 2022).

To conclude, hybridisation theory and data-driven campaign theory indicate that digital media have become an integrated part of election campaigns, but it remains largely unclear to what extent they are used, which factors decide their adaptation, and how they relate to the overall communicative context (cf. Karlsen & Enjolras, 2016). While there is widespread knowledge about the existence of hybrid and data-driven campaigning during contemporary elections, less is known about how the two models develop in a longitudinal perspective, and what strategic considerations political parties make in relation to this over time.

The study

With this study, we intend to fill these gaps in two ways. First, we map how hybrid and data-driven campaign processes are related to political parties' strategic considerations in terms of the planning and implementation of election campaigns. Second, we examine how hybrid campaigning and data-driven campaigning have developed over time. By following hybrid and data-driven campaign processes across time and space, this article contributes new knowledge to our understanding of how digitalisation processes evolve during contemporary election campaigns. Our empirical analysis of the implementation and integration of digital campaign communications by Swedish political parties in general election campaigns during 2010–2022 is guided by two overarching research questions:

RQ1. How can political parties' strategic considerations pertaining to digital communication be described?

RQ2. How do political parties perceive the importance of digital communication in election campaigns?

Data and method

The study of parties' strategies using first-hand information directly from the parties is a strength compared with most previous research that relies on parties' external communications. The data for this study are based on a mixed-methods approach (Guetterman & Fetters, 2018; Maxwell & Loomis, 2003) and consist of a combination of semi-structured interviews (Demicom, 2010, 2014, 2018, 2022) and surveys completed by highly ranked party members, party secretaries, or campaign managers of all eight parties represented in the Swedish parliament. The dataset consists of interviews and surveys obtained before and after the 2010, 2014, 2018, and 2022 election campaigns, with two exceptions: In 2010, the Sweden Democrats were not represented in the parliament at the start of the election campaign, and in 2018, the Centre Party chose not to answer the survey that went out before the election campaign. In total, the dataset consists of 30 party surveys and 46 interviews[2] (see Table 1).

TABLE 1 Party representatives in the study

Party	2010	2014	2018	2022
Centre	Lena Forsman (Campaign Manager)	Michael Arthursson (Party Secretary)	Michael Arthursson (Party Secretary)	Michael Arthursson (Party Secretary)
Christian Democrats	Lennart Sjögren (Party Secretary)	Acko Ankarberg Johansson (Party Secretary)	Acko Ankarberg Johansson (Party Secretary)	Peter Kullgren (Party Secretary)
Liberal	Erik Ullenhag (Party Secretary)	Anders Andrén (Communications Manager)	Maria Arnholm (Party Secretary)	Gustav Georgson (Deputy Party Secretary)
Green	Agneta Börjesson (Party Secretary)	Anders Wallner (Party Secretary)	Amanda Lind (Party Secretary)	Katrin Wissing (Party Secretary)
Moderate	Pär Henriksson (Communications Manager)	Per Nilsson[a] (Communications Manager)	Per Rosencrantz (Communications Manager)	Martin Borgs (Deputy Party Secretary)
Social Democrats	Ibrahim Baylan (Party Secretary)	Nina Wadensjö (Communications Manager)	John Zanchi (Campaign Manager)	Axel Björneke (Campaign Manager)
Sweden Democrats[b]	–	Björn Söder (Party Secretary)	Richard Jomshof (Party Secretary)	Richard Jomshof (Party Secretary)
Left	Anki Ahlsten (Party Secretary)	Aron Etzler (Party Secretary)	Aron Etzler (Party Secretary)	Hanna Gedin (Deputy Party Secretary)

[a] Per Nilsson aka Per Rosencrantz. [b] Sweden Democrats was not represented in the Swedish parliament before 2010.

In the first part of the empirical investigation, we analyse the interviews to examine the parties' strategic considerations pertaining to digital communication. The interviews were conducted on site, generally on the parties' own premises or in the parliament. The length of the interviews varied between 60 and 110 minutes and were recorded and printed in extenso.

The analysis of the interviews is inspired by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) and Braun and Clarke (2006) and is based on semi-structured interviews with qualitative open questions to encourage the interviewees to describe, in their own words, their parties' strategic considerations pertaining to digital communication in the election campaign. The interviews were thematically analysed, where we inductively identified recurring themes related to the use of digital campaigning. The thematic analysis is a flexible and adaptable qualitative method that is tied to neither a specific design nor theory (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As a research

tool, thematic analysis can contribute to detailed and rich descriptions of the object of study by identifying patterns and themes in the material.

In the second part of the empirical investigation, we report the analysis of the survey. To assess the importance of digital media relative to other forms of communication channels, we asked the respondents to rate the importance of different communication channels on a scale from 1 (unimportant) to 5 (very important). In the analysis, we include 20 items for which we have data for at least three elections.[3] These include eight digital media channels, eight traditional media channels, and four items representing different forms of direct communication.

A potential challenge with the data is that the respondents from the parties have not been consistent across all surveys; consequently, it cannot be ruled out that differences in level estimations from one year to another are at least partially due to different interpretations of the response scale, rather than differences in the perceived significance of each communication channel.

To alleviate this potential problem, our analysis is not based on the nominal survey responses. Instead, we compare normalised values. The normalised values are obtained by calculating how the score for each communication channel deviates from the mean of all responses from a respondent in each election year. In this way, the respective respondent's level of importance assigned to each communication channel is transformed to its relative importance compared with other communication channels. Using these normalised values, we are able to establish which communication channels become relatively more or less important over time. The normalised value theoretically ranges from -3.8 to +3.8.[4] However, as indicated in Table 2, the lowest value for an individual channel, for a party/election year dyad, is -1.74, while the highest value is +1.31. In the results section, we first report the average level of importance assigned to digital media channels compared with other communication channels in the survey. After this, we also report the score for each communication individually to assess variation within both groups of communication channels.

Strategic considerations pertaining to digital communication

In the first part of the results section, we report the thematic analysis of the interviews to capture political parties' strategic considerations about digital communication during election campaigns. In the second part, we move on to the analysis of the survey and how political parties perceive the importance of digital communications in elections.

Currently, Swedish political parties are using most of the digital channels available, and in hindsight, the process for this has evolved rapidly, though not without obstacles. Within merely a decade of the introduction of digital media such as blogs, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok, the range of channels to communicate on has increased dramatically. From the beginning, political parties have been interested in how to incorporate these digital media in their campaign practices, but it took time to find the right tone and

way of using them. Over time, however, digital communications, and especially social media, became less complicated to work with and was conducted on many platforms – traditional as well as new. The journey was not distinct from the beginning and met several challenges, so we start by describing how the digital journey has evolved. In the thematic analysis, we identified two overarching themes: the political parties' digital journey and what digital lessons were learned.

The digital journey

Viewed from today's perspective, the introduction of digital communication can be seen as smooth and without problems; however, this is not the whole truth. Rather, the journey has encountered both opportunities and obstacles. Over time, political parties and candidates have started to use a variety of digital tools to target segments of the electorate and reach out more efficiently. The basic function of digital channels has been to facilitate communication between party members and to produce content that draws public attention to political activities. The progress of integrating digital communication as campaign tools is related to technological advancement and linked to the overall practice. These two reasons are in turn closely linked to the chronological progression of time (in this study, 2010–2022). With this as a starting point, we identified three subthemes: Initially, there is *curiosity for the new digital channels*; thereafter follows a second phase of *enthusiasm for work with the digital channels*; and third is a phase that can be referred to as *a more pragmatic use of digital channels* but with a sense of confidence in digital media as a political tool.

Curiosity for the new digital channels

Digital technology was implemented for the first time in the European Parliament election in 2009 and in the General Election in 2010. Digital elements (mostly Twitter and blogs) were not integrated into the existing campaign structures, and strategies for how to use social media during campaigns were loosely formed. At this time, social media were considered something new and somewhat peculiar, but all parties started exploring the various elements of digital channels. The first challenge facing the parties was that digital media had few users, and communications between participants were rare. The second challenge was that the technology was still in its youth, and both the technology and connectivity were slow. In the 2010 General Election, parties used digital media primarily as a form of business intelligence and external monitoring; for example, all parties monitored the other parties' actions online, a task that has stayed relevant over the years. The most important channel for communication was the parties' websites. Updated websites were a vital communication channel to make political material easily available for all groups, which was seen by all parties as an important tool for democracy. There was a consensus among the political parties that digital media would not take over the role of traditional media. Instead, traditional media were perceived to have the most impact (Demicom, 2010).

Enthusiasm for work with digital channels

Social media use developed rapidly, and in 2014, digital channels were increasingly integrated and more seriously used in party campaign practices. All parties described social media as an appropriate tool to reach out to voters. The enthusiasm was connected to the hope that political communication on social media would create a greater interest in politics and that the distance between politicians and voters would decrease. From a political-party perspective, the major advantage of social media was linked to organisational and mobilisation effects. Social media were supposed to provide opportunities for reaching specific target groups and improve the ability to work efficiently in party communications. Although social media were used frequently in the 2014 General Election, the campaign cannot be described as fully digitalised. In contrast, the use of campaign practices was by all parties characterised as a mixture of traditional campaign tools and digital media channels. There were also still challenges. First and foremost, the Swedish public was not particularly politically active, and social media primarily provided arenas for private and non-political conversations. At this stage, there was no breakthrough in digital communications during election campaigns. Political parties used a wide range of media platforms to create, steer, and respond to an increased flow of communication. However, to what extent they were used, for what purposes, and how they related to the overall communicative context was still a learning process for all the parties, both large and small (Demicom, 2014).

A more pragmatic use of digital channels

Based on the rapid growth and use of social media in campaign work since its introduction, it was reasonable to assume that social media would have some form of final breakthrough in the 2018 or 2022 elections. However, it is more appropriate to claim that the political parties now adopted a more pragmatic approach to digital and social media. Political campaign practices used many platforms – traditional as well as new – and the use of digital channels could now be characterised as "business as usual". The technological development made it easier and cheaper for parties to conduct campaigns digitally, use targeted advertising, and engage digital campaigners. Another challenge was that different segments of the electorate were active on different social media channels (Demicom, 2018, 2022).

Despite expectations of a digital campaign breakthrough, since most Swedish voters now used social media, the 2018 and 2022 elections encountered a new challenge in the renaissance of non-digital, direct political communication, such as party meetings and canvassing. However, the challenges for the two elections varied. In 2018, and in the aftermath of the 2016 American presidential election, the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) warned of a higher risk for manipulation and so-called influence operations in digital channels. Public meetings were then presented as safer sources of political information, and distrust in the credibility of digital advocacy strengthened the image of diverse

forms of traditional political communication. In 2022, in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, the main reason was people's longing for meeting in person in combination with growing digital fatigue. After two years of mostly digital work, user statistics indicated that "dull" scrolling replaced active engagement in many digital channels (Internetstiftelsen, 2022). Furthermore, all the parties themselves emphasised the importance of face-to-face meetings. Over the years, the parties' use of door-to-door canvassing increased, and the elections in 2018 and 2022 were no exceptions, except for the Sweden Democrats who refrain from this type of activity. Additionally, traditional campaign methods, such as outdoor posting, have become another way of creating a tangible political presence in the cityscape (Demicom, 2018, 2022).

In sum, the interviews indicate that technological development has been an important driver of the evolution of how political parties design and execute their election campaigns. However, at the same time, there have been challenges, mostly related to the voters and developments in the outside world. Nonetheless, we can conclude that the political parties in Sweden now act within a more hybrid political communication system. Political parties use digital media platforms to respond to a flow of communication, and there is a developed system for how to relate to the overall communication.

What digital lessons were learned?

Since the introduction of digital channels in campaign practices, political parties have gradually learned to use social media more strategically, but it has been a process that has taken time and not been without challenges. Initially, there was a strong belief that social media could become an arena for communication and engagement. There was also consensus among all the parties about the need to think strategically when approaching social media. Furthermore, it was central for political parties to have a symbolic presence and pay attention to the development of digital channels overall. The impact of social media was initially considered to be limited but with potentially increasing strength. One prevalent effect of the introduction of social media was that campaign work quickly became a 24-hour activity, as social media never sleep (Demicom, 2010). Additionally, technological development accelerated. In 2010, for example, moving images were rare; since then, they have increased vastly in the 2014, 2018, and 2022 election campaigns. Today, parties need to be able to produce and publish campaign films continuously on different social media platforms several times per day (Demicom, 2010, 2014, 2018, 2022). In our analysis, we found four subthemes: *new opportunities with digital channels, difficulties with digital channels*, *digital channels have distinctive personas,* and *more evolution than revolution*.

New opportunities with digital channels

Digital media presented new opportunities for political parties to bypass the journalistic filter in news media and to communicate with voters directly. By

being less dependent on the media agenda, political parties could start new conversations even if news media were preoccupied with completely different political issues (Demicom, 2010, 2014). From this perspective, social media can be a tool for mass communication, but at the same time function as a channel to target specific groups. Consequently, social media can be seen as exceptionally strategically important for the parties. This advantage has become more evident with technological advancements, but at the same time, the counterweight for this is algorithms. All parties are dependent on the algorithms of the various channels that can be changed without notice, and which have a strong impact on which messages will reach larger user groups. One consequence of this is that organic reach – the number of people who encounter the content through unpaid distribution – is much lower today than it was five to ten years ago (Demicom, 2022).

If we look closer at Facebook, another problem is arising as its narrowing demographics (its user base is becoming increasingly older and whiter) means that political parties may have a harder time reaching younger and more diverse voters through Facebook. Facebook is also facing increasing competition from other social media platforms, such as TikTok and Instagram. This competition could lead to a further decline in Facebook's user base, which would in turn further reduce the reach of political parties on the platform. In addition, regulators in the US and Europe are progressively calling for both changes as well as increased transparency in the control functions of Facebook. This development may have major implications for how Facebook can be used as a platform going forward.

With social media, there was an opportunity to renew the political conversation and to meet voters on digital platforms. Social media became a new tool for parties to reach target groups and set their agendas. It was a new way to connect with and reach different voters – to have conversations, but at the same time listen and capture reactions to various events and election movements in the form of grassroots activities. With technological developments, the opportunities to create more professional content have increased, and material that previously had to be bought could now be made in-house. Over time, voters themselves could produce election materials, which became an important part of the elections campaign, as it could give energy to the campaigns (Demicom, 2022). The demand for communication to be genuine gives the advantage to the power of interactions made by voters instead of party communication. Social media also became a platform on which parties, as well as party leaders, could build their brands, and a stage for building identities or brands, consuming symbols, and showing commitment (Demicom, 2022).

Difficulties with digital channels

Using social media in election campaigns also entailed difficulties. In the beginning, parties had to relearn how to target groups on digital channels and work on which messages and arguments to use. Additionally, it is unlikely that target groups have a uniform view of what makes a political site interesting. To add

to the difficulties, the parties cannot control their message on social media platforms: Additional patterns noted were that parties observed how voters do not share party messages but instead share *opinions* on party messages (Demicom, 2014). Discussions also tended to become faster and tougher. Regardless of party affiliation, social media create extra work for the parties, for example, in the forms of hate-storms and trolls. This means that parties need to devote a considerable amount of time to moderating their channels, which calls for additional workforce (Demicom, 2014, 2018). In addition, the current media landscape can be described as becoming more competitive and crowded. The debate climate is becoming increasingly harsh, and the speed of communication is increasing. The threats of disinformation and fake news are becoming more serious (Demicom, 2014, 2018, 2022).

Digital channels have distinctive personas

The political parties recognised early on that social media channels had distinctive personas. Twitter was primarily used to obtain the attention of media, convincing voters (activists) and party activists with the aim of fostering a more interactive political conversation. It operated at a high pace and can best be described as an "intense" debate forum.

Facebook was used for existing voters (community building and supporter mobilisation), party activists, as well as media attention. In comparison with Twitter, Facebook had a wider reach and more comprehensive features, and the platform's interactive tools such as likes, comments, and shares enabled politicians to engage with their constituents with the aim of encouraging political participation. Furthermore, the parties worked to keep the comment fields clean (Demicom, 2010, 2014).

The use of Instagram was, in comparison with Twitter and Facebook, to achieve a broader reach to voters around 30–60 years old. The persona of Instagram was described as more personal, including a broad spectrum of pictures with a slightly more personal touch and emphasis on visual communication. As such, politicians often used it to curate a more personal and relatable image. Where the goal is to create a balance between authenticity and professional images, it could also be described as a digital election poster with the ability to update information instantly (Demicom, 2014, 2018, 2022).

Recent platforms – such as Snapchat and TikTok – are primarily targeted at younger groups and are built upon algorithms with user connections, which makes it difficult to give them a more universal persona. It should be noted that in 2022, Snapchat and Tik Tok were not fully incorporated into party election communication (Demicom, 2022). But studies have shown that Snapchat, although still less frequently used, allows politicians to share more candid, behind-the-scenes content, with the aim of further humanising their public image. With YouTube, many age groups are reached; nevertheless, it requires persistence and work that must be long-term (Demicom, 2022). Additionally, the platforms have evolved; for example, Facebook has over the years become more professional.

There was a clear change after the 2016 American presidential election, and since then, buying and distributing dark ads have been largely stopped.

Over time, social media channels have had different peaks. Initially, the hype was blogs and Twitter, followed by Facebook and Instagram, and in recent years Snapchat and TikTok. Social media have taken an increasingly prominent role in the parties' election campaigns and is now used by both single-party candidates, who have their own accounts, and parties, as they communicate directly to both voters and the media. It also makes up an increasing share of the parties' growing campaign budgets. The use of social media has been refined, and there are now much greater opportunities for reaching different voter groups, as purchased content can be targeted specifically via different channels. From a strategic point of view, social media is a tool for implementing the strategy to reach different voter groups. Social media have also become more important for all parties' internal communication to get grassroots people involved (Demicom, 2022).

More evolution than revolution

When digital and social media were introduced, the playing field between large and small parties levelled out in many ways. All parties had to learn how to work with these new platforms. Technological developments made it easier and cheaper for the parties to run campaigns digitally, use target advertising, and engage digital campaign workers (Demicom, 2010, 2014). In particular, social media quickly became integrated into the parties' campaigns. Today, however, there is less of an equalising factor, and instead, parties with more personal and economic resources are now able to use social media in more sophisticated ways (Demicom, 2022).

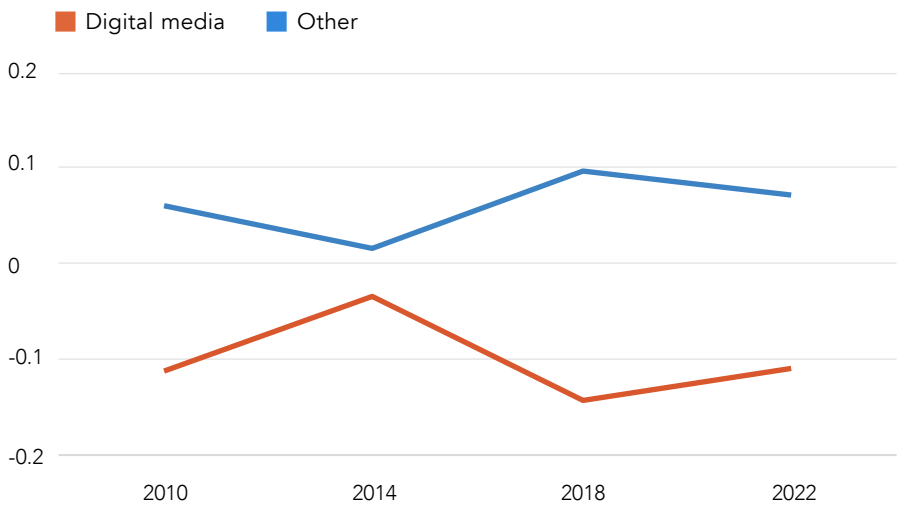
To conclude, social media have gradually become a more important arena in election campaigns. Nevertheless, it is equally true that extensive exposure to these platforms is not a guarantee of electoral success. Social media can engage, mobilise, and especially have a polarising effect. However, at the same time, social media's power tends to be overestimated rather than underestimated (Demicom, 2018, 2022). From the 2018 and 2022 elections, the parties have learned that interactions on social media cannot directly be translated into votes. Instead, it seems that in an increasingly fragmented and complex media landscape, it is now insufficient to be successful on one platform or in one media channel; all campaign practices must be taken into consideration (Demicom, 2018, 2022). At this point, the hybridisation of campaigning with digital and traditional campaign features appearing side by side is integrated with distinct strategic party objectives. These changes in election campaigning practices also mirror a parallel ongoing process of professionalisation, where campaign structures and strategies are carefully and simultaneously developed to gain electoral success. From a technical development perspective, there are reasons to expect that political parties' campaign strategies in the future will be implemented both more quickly and more comprehensively.

Importance of different communication channels

In the second empirical part, we examine the importance of digital communication channels. To assess the extent to which there are general trends, we use the survey responses and compare the mean scores of the digital communication channels with the mean scores of the remaining communication channels in the survey. Positive values should be interpreted as above average importance.

As shown in Figure 1, digital media are on average less important than the other communication channels included in the survey. Even though the difference in importance is quite small, digital media are perceived as less important than other forms of communication in each of the four election campaigns. Moreover, there is no clear trend. The difference in importance decreases from 2010 to 2014 but increases again in 2018. In the most recent election campaign, digital communication channels continue to be significantly less important than the other communication channels included in the survey. Thus, in contrast to recent research that assumes that the Internet and social media are becoming more important for political communication (Chadwick & Stromer-Galley, 2016; Taras & Davis, 2022), our data do not suggest a relative increase in the importance of digital media compared with traditional means of communication. Importantly, however, this is the picture that emerges from an analysis of aggregate data. To further assess the role of digital media, we also need to delve deeper to see what patterns can be revealed when individual communication channels are compared.

FIGURE 1 The importance of digital communication channels in comparison with other communication channels, 2010–2022



Comments: The graph shows a comparison of the mean scores of the digital communication channels with the mean scores of the other communication channels in the survey. Positive values should be interpreted as above average importance. For a complete list of the channels included in digital media and other respectively, see Table 2.

Table 2 shows the average level of importance for all individual communication channels in the survey for the four election years, as well as the average level of importance for all years together and the change in importance from 2010 to 2022. Positive values indicate that the individual channel is considered above average in significance, while negative numbers indicate the opposite.

The picture that emerges is quite ambiguous. While some digital media are indeed among the more important channels, others are among the less important, according to party informants. Moreover, while social media generally are considered somewhat more important than other forms of digital media, the picture is not clear-cut.

Roughly, digital media can be divided into four groups in terms of their relative importance. Facebook and party websites are *consistently important*, having been considered relatively important by party informants in all four election campaigns. YouTube and Instagram are *increasingly important*, as they were relatively unimportant at first but gained in importance. Together with Facebook, these two social media were among the most important among all items covered in the survey in the most recent election of 2022. A third group consists of blogs and Twitter and can be described as *decreasingly important*, as they were initially considered relatively important but have gradually lost importance over time. Finally, communication via SMS, MMS, and e-mail during the election campaign can be described as *consistently unimportant*, as these were considered relatively unimportant in all four surveyed election campaigns.[5]

Diverging trends can also be observed among the other communication channels included in the surveys. Traditional media channels, such as political shows on television, television news, radio news, and newspapers, are all among the most important communication channels on average. At the other end of the spectrum, we find other forms of media; party informants ranked, for example, both magazines and television entertainment as among the least important. Direct forms of communication – election posters, election cabins, and door-to-door canvassing – are relatively unimportant, as they are all below 0 on average. There is, however, an increasing trend in the level of importance from 2010 to 2022 for election posters, door-to-door canvassing, and direct marketing.

TABLE 2 The importance of communication channels, 2010–2022

Type of channel	Channel	2010	2014	2018	2022	Mean	Δ 2010–2022[a]
Digital media	Facebook	0.28[b]	0.26	1.31	0.91	0.69	0.63
	Websites	0.32	0.76	0.02	0.28	0.34	-0.04
	YouTube	-0.06	0.26	0.02	0.53	0.19	0.59
	Instagram	n.a.[c]	-0.74	0.45	0.78	0.16	1.52
	Blogs	0.44	-0.99	-0.12	-0.84	-0.38	-1.28
	Twitter	0.28[b]	0.26	-0.98	-1.09	-0.38	-1.37
	SMS/MMS	-0.68	–	-0.69	-0.47	-0.61	0.21
	E-mail	-1.18	–	-1.41	-0.97	-1.19	0.21
Other	TV political shows	0.82	1.01	1.02	0.91	0.94	0.09
	TV news	0.82	1.01	0.88	1.03	0.93	0.21
	Radio news	0.82	0.51	0.31	0.91	0.64	0.09
	Newspapers	0.69	0.88	0.17	0.16	0.47	-0.53
	Local newspapers	0.57	0.51	0.42	0.03	0.38	-0.54
	Tabloids	0.19	0.76	0.31	-0.34	0.23	-0.53
	Election posters	-0.56	0.26	-0.26	0.28	-0.07	0.84
	Direct marketing	-0.63	0.13	0.45	-0.34	-0.10	0.29
	Election cabins	-0.31	-0.24	-0.26	-0.59	-0.35	-0.28
	Door-to-door canvassing	-0.43	-1.24	-0.41	0.16	-0.48	0.59
	TV entertainment	-0.68	-1.74	-0.69	-0.59	-0.93	0.09
	Magazines	-0.68	-1.62	-0.69	-0.72	-0.93	-0.04

Comments: Communication channels are ordered in decreasing order after their mean value.

[a] The last column denotes the change in importance from 2010 to 2022. In the cases where there is no data for 2010, we instead compare with the first instance of data in our dataset. [b] In the 2010 survey, respondents were asked about the importance of "social networks on Internet (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, flickr)". Facebook and Twitter are therefore assigned the same values. [c] Instagram was first included in the survey in 2014.

To conclude, what emerges is thus a mixed picture, where parties seem to combine various forms of communication on different platforms and outlets rather than focusing solely on digital media, traditional media, or direct communication. Moreover, while social media are generally considered more important than less interactive "web 1.0" digital media channels, this trend is not without exceptions. Party websites are still relatively important whereas Twitter, for example, is among the least important. In line with Chadwick's (2013) concept of a "hybrid media system", parties prioritise a range of different media platforms to create,

steer, and respond to a flow of communication. No clear general trends can be easily identified, and digital media do not seem to replace older forms of communication. Our results thus align with recent research on platform convergence and suggest that political actors run successful campaigns by creating a synergy between traditional media channels and social media (Karlsen & Enjolras, 2016).

Conclusions

This study of the digitalisation of Swedish election campaigns from a political-party perspective was guided by two main research questions. First, we examined the political parties' strategic considerations pertaining to digital communications. The results from the interviews showed that party adaption to new communication channels has been an evolutionary process, and that the political potentials of new communication tools have generally been overestimated. Party perceptions of digital and social media varied in the campaigns examined. An initial curiosity and enthusiasm have been gradually replaced by a more pragmatic approach and an increased awareness of the complexity of communication in a more fragmented media landscape.

There has been a widespread consensus among the political parties about the need to think strategically when approaching the new communication tools. The interactive and agenda-setting potentials, as well as the new abilities to target specific segments of the electorate, have encouraged the parties to integrate the new tools into their campaign strategies. At the same time, the parties have realised that effective campaign work on digital platforms demands significant resources, and that recurrent public debates about the risks with disinformation and hate speech may undermine the credibility of the new platforms. In line with results from previous studies of the implementation of data-driven campaigning (Kefford et al., 2022; Kruschinksi & Haller, 2017; Larsson, 2017), Swedish political parties do not, so far, let their campaigns be completely decided by existing digital technology opportunities.

The second research question asked how the political parties perceived the importance of digital communications during election campaigns. The results of the party surveys indicate that digital media were generally perceived as less important than other communication channels during the analysed period. In contrast to previous research (Russmann, 2022), no clear general trend of higher appreciation of digital communication channels could be observed across time, even though parties' use of digital media had become more strategically oriented over time.

Furthermore, the analysis of the survey results suggests that digital media channels could be roughly divided into four groups in terms of their relative importance. Some outlets, like Facebook and party websites, were consistently important during the twelve years. Others, like YouTube and Instagram, were increasingly important. Finally, Twitter and blogs were considered decreasingly important, while e-mail, SMS, and MMS were perceived as more or less unimportant in every election campaign analysed. Overall, the results confirm that the political parties continuously try to create a successful synergy based on instant evaluations of the efficiency of the different communication channels at hand.

The results of our study shed some new light on the digitalisation of contemporary election campaigns in a longitudinal perspective. Swedish political parties do not simply replace traditional communications with digital channels as they become available, but instead gradually integrate them into their campaign structure and strategy if they have the resources to do so and if it works well within the overall campaign context. Some channels introduced become permanent important tools, while others never achieve an important place in the party campaign toolbox. The process of adaptation of digital campaigning is not linear, but rather back and forth, as party perceptions of the importance of communication channels vary across time.

The findings of Swedish election campaign developments can be related to international perspectives. The most strategically developed and innovative election campaigns have so far taken place in the US, and many studies are focusing on the American campaigning environment. However, the situation in the US differs from national contexts in many other parts of the world. In countries with multiparty political systems, party-centred campaigns, media systems with stronger public service broadcasting, and less liberal campaign financing regulations, campaigns can be expected to develop in less predictable ways.

The fact that Swedish political parties, regardless of size and ideology and in contrast to developments in other countries, do not thus far prioritise digital over traditional communication may have different underlying explanations. First, party approaches to the new communication channels have been characterised by both unrealistic expectations and uncertainty about their possible political potentials. Digitalisation has not yet proved to be a key to electoral success. Second, the national context of election campaigns in Sweden matters. News media, and particularly television, have remained central in importance despite the rapid digital transformation. Traditional direct communications such as canvassing and advertising are also considered relatively important over time. Thus, all Swedish political parties must try to find a reasonable balance between the assumed usefulness of new campaign communications and the existing experiences of traditional communications. In such deliberative processes, digital does not always come first.

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Endnotes

1 When we make references to social media in this article, we refer to Web 2.0 tools that offer a higher level of interactivity than other forms of digital media (Dimitrova et al., 2014). Examples of such are, for example, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter (now known as X), and YouTube. When we use the broader term digital media, we thus include both social media and less interactive Web 1.0 platforms such as e-mail, SMS, MMS, and websites (cf. Carr & Hayes, 2015).

2 Some party representatives were interviewed more than once.

3 We do not include data for the latest forms of digital media adopted by political parties, as our primary interest is to gauge potential change over time. For this reason, we do not include data on Snapchat (included in 2018 and 2022 surveys) and TikTok (included in 2022 survey).

4 The theoretically lowest value is achieved when the individual communication channel is assigned a value of 1, while all the remaining 19 channels are assigned a value of 5. In this case, the average value for all channels is $(19 \times 5 + 1) / 20 = 4.8$, and the normalised value for the individual channel is $1 - 4.8 = -3.8$. The theoretical maximum is consequently achieved when the individual channel is assigned 5, while all the other channels are rated as 1. Thus, an average calculated as $(19 \times 1 + 5) / 20 = 1.2$ and a normalised value for the individual channel of $5 - 1.2 = 3.8$.

5 Since Snapchat and TikTok have only been included in two surveys and one survey, respectively, it is too early to place them into any of the four groups; thus far, however, both have been considered relatively unimportant by the parties. There is, however, indications that the parties have misjudged the importance of these platforms, as one prominent topic in the postelection debate was about how TikTok has become one of the most important sources of political information for young voters (Bolin et al., 2022).

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