

Social media as an agenda-setting instrument in local politics

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ABSTRACT

This article contributes to the literature on political agenda-setting on social media in the local context. Using interviews with local politicians in northern Norway, we discuss local politicians' use of social media for agenda-setting in between elections from an agency perspective. We ask whether local politicians seek to promote and control the definition of an issue on social media, and whether local politicians are influenced by citizens' opinions on these platforms. We find that local politicians do take advantage of social media in the agenda-setting process, both for problem definition and to sell their ideas. Our findings reveal that local politicians use social media to bypass traditional media for political messaging and that they are sensitive to public opinion on Facebook. Furthermore, there is evidence in our study of online debates brought into formal policymaking processes.

KEYWORDS: social media, agenda-setting, local politics, political communication, northern Norway

Introduction

The use of social media within local government has increased significantly since the turn of the 2010s (Berlot et al., 2012; Mossberger et al., 2013). Politicians may make use of social media to signal which issues are gaining traction, which are falling in or out of favour, and to introduce novel solutions and problems to the public agenda. Social media, particularly Facebook, allows politicians to directly reach out to more loyal and diversified groups of supporters without journalistic

interference (Sandberg et al., 2022), and potential gains from using these platforms are thus discussions that encourage participation and influence (Bode et al., 2014). However, social media also empower citizens vis-à-vis politicians (e.g., Ellison & Hardey, 2014; Larsson & Kalsnes, 2014; Gilardi et al., 2022), and they constitute a sphere in which emotions drive online political behaviour (Wollebæk et al., 2019). This new media environment further provides the opportunity for local politicians to use social media for agenda-setting purposes.

The political science tradition in the agenda-setting paradigm assumes that actors and coalitions have a vital role in agenda-setting, as well as an actively involved public (Kingdon 2011; Dearing & Rogers, 1996: 56). Political agenda-setting in social media has been a subject for various disciplines, including media studies, policy studies, and political communication (Wolfe et al., 2013; Seggaard, 2015). However, despite a large and increasing number of studies (Jungherr, 2016), the literature has not provided a clear answer pertaining to the role of social media in political agenda-setting (Gilardi et al., 2022). Moreover, the role of social media in *local* government agenda-setting, and local politicians' everyday efforts to gain influence using social media, are neglected elements in the literature. The relational dynamics between elected officials and citizens are particularly interesting at the local level, however, due to the proximity between local councillors and citizens. Traditions for citizen participation make the local setting unique (Mossberger et al., 2013), as local citizens can influence local politics by engaging in issues that are important in their everyday lives, and because there is a shared understanding of local challenges.

Our primary objective with this article is to illuminate how, if at all, local politicians use social media for agenda-setting purposes in between elections. We ask whether local politicians seek to promote and control the definition of an issue on social media, and whether they are they influenced by citizens' opinions expressed on social media. To answer these questions, we draw on the political science tradition in the agenda-setting paradigm and set a particular focus on local politicians' use and evaluations of social media as an arena for defining problems (the problem stream) and to sell ideas (the policy stream). We also examine social media as an arena where input can impact decision-making (the political stream) in issues of high salience in local communities. Thus, we focus on how local politicians engage in social media debates, their willingness to promote and control the definition of an issue on social media, and whether they are influenced by citizens' opinions expressed on social media. The aim of this study is not to generalise to all local entities or the political system, but rather to develop knowledge about how local politicians act according to central elements in the agenda-setting perspective.

Northern Norway is an interesting region for this inquiry, as it is situated in a highly digitalised country (European Commission, 2022), where social media are widespread and commonly used (Skogerbø & Karlsen, 2021), and where a limited number of traditional news channels are perceived as powerful agenda-setters. In this political system, local politicians are pivotal to the well-being of the population, as they have key political functions such as public agenda-setting,

problem solving, and mobilising support (Torfing & Sørensen, 2019). Despite how Norwegian municipalities vary in size, nearly all have the same political structure, and large and small alike have the same set of responsibilities. Municipalities in Norway take the lion's share of public welfare, and they occupy a prominent position within the government structure. For example, they run primary schools, kindergartens, and homes for the elderly, decide certain environmental issues, maintain local infrastructure, and deal with development and local challenges. Municipalities further have a political organisational form whereby positions are allocated among the key political parties according to the party strength in the local council (Baldersheim, 2005).

This case study is based on data from 39 interviews with politicians from the local government executive boards in six municipalities in Norland County and Troms and Finnmark County (both city and district local governments). The chosen municipalities were of interest because there had been heated debates in the communities that also unfolded on social media, which enabled analysis of whether and how social media debates can have an impact on local policymaking in these settings. Although the council is the ultimate decision-maker arena, the executive board [Formannskapet] is a political body with representatives from all the major parties in the local government council, it meets more often than the council, and engages in at-hand decision-making. Hence, the sample comprises a broad set of local elite representatives. In addition to being discussed in the council and the local government executive board, different issues are also deliberated and prepared in committees or local political parties, sometimes involving direct citizen involvement. The standpoints from local debates on social media can enter the decision-making process in all phases and in all these arenas. The analysis of these processes is primarily based on statements concerning Facebook, which was the preferred platform of most of the representatives in the sample. Other sources, such as traditional media articles and Facebook pages and groups, were used to verify the information provided through the interviews.

In the following section, we present elements from an agenda-setting perspective and review some of the main conclusions of social media research. Thereafter, we account for the methodological design and the empirical material applied in the study. Subsequently, we present local debates on social media, the use of social media for political messaging and agenda-setting, and local politicians' sensitivity to public opinion on social media. Finally, we conclude on how social media influence the local political agenda-setting process.

Research of political agenda-setting and social media

The political science perspective on agenda-setting traditionally assumes an actively involved public and processes where key individuals can shape the agenda. Kingdon (2011: 3) defined the political agenda as “the list of subjects or problems to which government officials, and people outside of government closely associated with those officials, are paying some serious attention at any given time”, while the agenda-setting process “narrows [a] set of conceivable

subjects to the set that actually becomes the focus of attention”. The political science agenda-setting perspective differs from the communication research perspective, where agenda-setting is traditionally understood as a process during which the media influences what the public considers to be important issues (see McCombs & Shaw, 1972), and where audience members have a passive role (Dearing & Rogers, 1996: 71).

One could say that the communication perspectives’ main hypothesis is that when the media emphasise certain issues, and not others, this determines which issues the public think are important (Dearing & Rogers, 1996: 55), whilst the political science perspective is more actor- and coalition-oriented. However, the divisions are somewhat blurred, as Kingdon’s framework (a political science “garbage can” perspective) used here certainly does acknowledge that the media have the power to influence public opinion and thereby impact the political agenda, by acting as a communicator that magnifies movements and challenges the status quo (Kingdon, 2011: 57–61). This makes it relevant to include some insight from the communication perspective in our approach.

In Kingdon’s multiple streams framework, conditions that deviate from policymakers’ or citizens’ ideal state are defined as the “problem stream” (Kingdon, 2011). These are considered public because government action is needed to resolve them (Béland & Howlet, 2016: 222). The fact that problems are social constructs and must be framed in a certain way to attract policymakers’ attention makes policy entrepreneurs – advocates who invest their resources to promote a position (Herweg et al., 2018: 22; Kingdon, 2011: 179) – central in this framework. In the policy stream, ideas generated by politicians, experts, and analysts flow around in a policy “primeval soup” (Kingdon, 2011: 166). These ideas then go through a process of “softening up”, whereby members of the policy community discuss, modify, and recombine the ideas until one is left with an alternative supported by a substantial part of the community, which then receives serious attention (Kingdon, 2011: 127–130). In the process of “softening up”, policy entrepreneurs are likely to convert novel ideas into “good currency”, or policy options designed to gain popular support (Mintrom & Vergari, 1996; Polsby, 1984). Social media may provide a platform through which local policy entrepreneurs can define problems and sell ideas in a way that attracts attention.

The political stream consists of elements that influence politics, such as swings in the national mood, public opinion, election results, changes in administration, partisan or ideological shifts, and interest groups’ campaigns (Herweg et al., 2018: 24–25). The media are also considered significant in the political stream because they have the power to influence public opinion and can indirectly impact the political agenda by acting as a communicator that magnifies movements and challenges the status quo (Kingdon, 2011: 57–61). The three streams may be connected by design or chance in “policy windows” that appear whenever a major incident occurs that requires action, and these windows can serve as opportunities for change (Kingdon, 2011; Polsby, 1984).

Researchers focusing on social media at the local level have been particularly interested in the local government use of different platforms. It has been found

that messaging services, such as WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, and Snapchat, make a distinctive contribution to contemporary repertoires of political talk, with important implications for the quality and inclusiveness of interpersonal political discussion in Germany, Italy, and the UK (Valeriani & Vaccari, 2017). Findings from Spain, however, show that its use is not capable of taking advantage of all the potentialities of the digital environment, especially due to the lack of dialogue with citizens and solid strategic planning (Marcos-García et al., 2021). Contributions focusing on local governments' use of Twitter have focused on social media as informal networks of professional practice within the British public sector, finding that hashtag communities are arenas that bring together different actors with a public sector interest (De Widt & Panagiotopoulos, 2018). Studies of municipal Facebook pages in Israel found that Facebook adoption by municipalities is uneven and that the level of engagement is higher on the pages of larger cities (Lev-On & Steinfeld, 2015), whilst research from Italy highlighted that Facebook functions as a "hub of information" and a meeting place for Italian local governments (Solito & Materassi, 2020).

Research of politicians' use of social media has focused particularly on identity construction and the self-representation level (e.g., DePaula, et al., 2018; Stier et al., 2018), and studies have been devoted to the use of the Internet by politicians during elections and for campaigning (e.g., Enli, 2017; Kriesi, 2012; Stier et al., 2018). Research from national Norwegian campaigns ten years ago found that political candidates reported more idealistic motivations for democratic dialogue concerning their social media use than they managed to manoeuvre in practice; that politicians have and are expected to have a personal presence on social media; and that for some, it represents yet another marketing tool (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013). Studies have also shown that political actors are sometimes reluctant to engage with citizens online, for example, due to a lack of resources, offensive online behaviour, or negative media attention (Kalsnes, 2016: 5). Moreover, Larsson and Kalsnes (2014) found that the everyday use of social media ten years ago was quite low among politicians elected to the national parliament.

Research of social media agenda-setting also includes studies of the dynamic interplay between traditional and social media. Politicians share content on social media, hoping that it will be picked up by the traditional media (Graham, 2014), and they may use social media to criticise or correct how an issue has been framed in the traditional media, or share content themselves to take control of a story (Aalen & Iversen, 2022: 165). However, studies of local Norwegian politicians and the use of social media provide sober results concerning this interplay between traditional and social media. For example, Skogerbø and Krumsvik (2015) studied the intermedia agenda-setting between social media and traditional news media in the 2011 Norwegian local election campaigns, finding that local politicians were active on social media as part of their campaigning, but little evidence that social media content travelled to local newspapers and contributed to agenda-setting.

Studying data related to the same local election campaign, Seggaard and Nielsen (2013) explored the role of social media and found that election blogs are primarily used by those who are also politically active in other arenas, and that most

communication consists of one-way information dissemination. However, at the sub-national level in Scandinavia, traditional modes of communication for political purposes also remain important (Larsson & Skogerbø, 2018), even though social media platforms have increased in popularity among political representatives (Larsson & Kalsnes, 2014). Citizen interactions with local politicians on social media in an everyday context have also been studied. Kalsnes and colleagues (2017) found that the stronger the political interest citizens express, especially on Facebook, the more commenting and sharing of content. Bjørnå, Steinveg, and Hernes (2022) found that social media is hardening the political debate and contributing to the “professionalising” of political communication, also at the local level.

Overall, the existing literature confirms that social media are commonly used by local politicians in Norway, content on social media barely travels to local newspapers, and most communication consists of one-way information dissemination. Thus, while social media may contribute to empowering politicians vis-à-vis traditional media, and certain studies have found limited evidence of Facebook as a de facto moderator of the public sphere (e.g., Karlsson et al., 2022), traditional media still maintain a mediating gatekeeper position, at least at the national level. Social media therefore contribute to creating a “hybrid” media system that expands the number and types of actors who can shape the political discourse and agenda (Chadwick, 2017; Gilardi et al., 2022; Jungherr et al., 2019). Through a review of the literature on politicians’ social media usage in the “hybrid” media context, Severin-Nielsen (2023: 177–178) found that three overall themes have been devoted much attention: social media usage by politicians (in context), variations in politicians’ social media and traditional media usage, and broader effects of the emergence of social media in politics. We seek to contribute to the first identified theme, specifically to the literature on the role of social media in politicians’ broader communication and issue-framing strategies, local politicians’ use of traditional versus social media, and how tuned in politicians are to citizens’ opinions expressed on social media (Severin-Nielsen, 2023: 180–181).

Empirical material

The empirical data supporting this case study consists of interviews conducted in 2022 with 39 executive board representatives from six municipalities in northern Norway. The cases were chosen because there had recently been heated debates unfolding on social media in these municipalities, which made it interesting to enquire whether and in what way this had an impact on local policymaking. The municipalities in our sample are Bodø (population 52,852), Tromsø (population 77,399), Harstad (population 24,785), Alta (population 21,144), Sør-Varanger (population 9,925), and Nordreisa (population 4,746). There were 56 permanent members of the six executive boards in the municipalities selected for the case study, and all representatives were contacted by e-mail; 39 representatives agreed to contribute to the study. Specifically, we interviewed seven representatives from Bodø, nine from Tromsø, ten from Harstad, five from Alta, four from

Nordreisa, and four from Sør-Varanger. It was beneficial to base the study on representatives from the executive boards, as these boards comprise a variety of political parties and are gender balanced, which is reflected in our pool of informants. There is also an approximately even distribution between politicians in position and in opposition in our sample. In terms of age, the representatives were distributed as follows: seven were 20–40 years old, twenty-seven were 40–60, and five were 60+.

The interviews provided a useful information source about why local political representatives use, or do not use, social media platforms for political purposes. Furthermore, a qualitative approach made it possible to obtain detailed information about how social media influence the day-to-day activities of the political representatives, and the interviews provided detailed information about the representatives' personal perspectives, feelings, and actions in relation to social media. The interviews lasted 30–40 minutes each and were conducted in Norwegian on Microsoft Teams, where they were recorded on video and later transcribed and translated into English as close to the original intent of the statements as possible. The interview questions are recited in the empirical section.

We identified five categories of relevant issues in the transcribed data material: 1) the most heated political issues in the municipality that evoked the most negative reactions when discussed on social media; 2) social media versus traditional media as channels for political messaging; 3) social media as an instrument for agenda-setting in local politics; 4) whether debates on social media had influenced policymaking in the municipalities; and 5) whether input from social media influenced the individual representative's own political standpoint.

These five categories were set up in a table, and quotes from the transcriptions from the six municipalities were added to a matrix to enable the identification of overlaps or divergence between our informants. For example, did informants perceive that social media is beneficial for political messaging or agenda-setting? Did our informants perceive social media to have an impact on local politics? Such issues were coded in a spreadsheet, with the variables “yes”, “no”, “no opinion”, and “both yes and no”. For the identification of the most salient issues on social media, we made a table and coded and counted statements from all informants. We have selected the most illustrative answers to the research questions from the transcribed interview material to include in the article, to cast light on the five categories of issues and how the informants perceived them.

The Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research, Sikt, has approved the study's ethical considerations, and names or sensitive information disclosed by informants are not revealed. The representatives in the sample prefer to use their personal Facebook profile for political purposes, and some also have a professional page, so the analysis is primarily based on statements concerning that platform. Three representatives (Informants 21, 30, and 34, aged 71, 52, and 63, respectively) from different municipalities in the sample did not use social media for political purposes at all. They are still included in the sample because of their reflections on the dynamics of online debates and how social media can contribute to shaping local politics.

Local political debates on social media

In the following section, we account for the most heated local debates on social media in the case municipalities, to set the stage for the forthcoming analysis. Subsequently, we examine the use of social media for political messaging; social media as an instrument for agenda-setting in local politics; and the potential effect of social media debates on local policymaking and the representatives' political standpoint.

The most heated local debates on social media

We asked our informants to identify which issues had dominated the political and public debate in their municipality over the past two years, and which issues had been the most heated when discussed on social media. From their descriptions of these matters, we found that the dominating issues had been school structures, elderly care, disputes over land use, and identity politics. The local politicians in our sample described how they often observed strong citizen engagement on social media concerning local political issues.

For example, pertaining to school structure, “action groups” are established on Facebook, which grow and “get a life of their own”, or even develop into real-life demonstrations – as happened during the proposed closing of a university branch in one of the municipalities. Concerning social media debates about local services such as healthcare, Facebook groups were described as a channel for next of kin and employees in the health sector to express their opinions and concerns.

One example related to land use involved a conflict between dogsledders and landowners and sheep-farmers in one of the smaller municipalities. The landowners did not want the dogsledders to use a sheep grazing area in the forest for dog training and dogsledding. Another example of social media disputes over land use concerned a city development project, where a private enterprise wanted to develop a new activity-based tourism destination immediately outside the city, with cabins and an alpine village.

A debate about street signs in Russian in a smaller municipality is an example of a heated social media debate involving identity politics. This took place in a community where ties between cultures have evolved over time, where the influx of Russians is high, and Russia's war on Ukraine has led to divisions among the local inhabitants. The debate on social media concerned whether to continue to have street signs in Russian in a Norwegian municipality. In contrast to other issues, this social media debate was not elevated to the formal political agenda at the time of the study.

Social media versus traditional media as channels for political messaging

Social media is certainly used by our informants as an instrument to communicate political messages to the electorate. Those using it answered along these lines: “I use it a lot, I can lead the political debates (Informant 29)”; “I see an immediate response” (Informant 12); or “I have been active in some Facebook groups that have been useful to sell my ideas” (Informant 23). Those more reluctant

to use social media for political purposes were divided between those who used it sometimes (especially related to campaigns) and those who had a personal social media profile where they barely discussed political matters. One informant stated that “if you are not careful about what you post on social media, things can be taken out of context and develop into a scandal” (Informant 38), and the youngest informant described how “social media is damaging with the debate climate we have here today” (Informant 3).

These comments pertain to two different debates. One is the polarisation in the local border community following Russia’s war on Ukraine. The second is the debate about the city development project with a new activity-based tourism destination, with two opposing groups on Facebook: one tuned to environmental arguments and the other wanting development. The informants depicted this social media dynamic as highly polarised, with the most vocal critics controlling the dynamic of the discussion. Politicians were called names, and there were smear campaigns to prevent the re-election of certain politicians. Other informants told stories about how people left politics because their political standpoints were unpopular, and citizens in the municipalities stopped going to shops and businesses owned by these politicians’ spouses (e.g., Informant 30).

Our informants also noted that they often use traditional media for agenda-setting purposes, and some prefer a mix of communication through social and traditional media. The interplay between social media and traditional media is therefore important for the agenda-setting activity of local politicians. This is exemplified by such comments as: “It is a combination of social and traditional media, journalists use things they find on Facebook in their work” (Informant 10); and “It is a race to come first and take ownership of an issue, also towards the traditional media” (Informant 4).

Additionally, the informants shared that their use of social media provides them with more control and political power: “One can ‘get cleaned’ in social media” (Informant 17); “I have control over what I write and what I mean” (Informant 19); “I think I have more control, newspapers tend to interpret what I say how they wish” (Informant 1); and “Social media gives me better control, it is possible for me to front ideas with more nuance and I decide what is written” (Informant 8). Thus, in line with the findings of Kalsnes (2016: 8), we find that social media can be advantageous for bypassing mass media, as indicated by comments like the following: “You can influence what newspapers write about by posting on social media. They look at politicians’ profiles for stories to write about” (Informant 2); “Yes, I perceive that posting something on social media can contribute to agenda setting” (Informant 28); and “You can say something to the newspaper, and it is posted on Facebook and contributes to setting the agenda” (Informant 23).

Social media as an instrument for agenda-setting and how social media debates influence policymaking

Using social media for agenda-setting was a common feature highlighted by our informants: “I sometimes try to set the agenda” (Informant 33); “I can if I want to, if the issue is a current event, and it is sometimes just as natural for me to

link to other people's viewpoints" (Informant 23). These statements come from representatives in opposition, but we find that local politicians in office hesitate to strive for a high profile as agenda-setters. Hence, they consider which issues they want to have an agenda-setting role in, and their use of social media depends on the specific issue up for discussion.

The downside of political discussions on social media is that they can be emotional, can become too personal, and can lead to attacks on the moral and ethical views of individual politicians. Thus, many informants perceived that it is better to not engage, because this is time- and energy-consuming, and they risk having to withstand personal attacks and harassment. While politicians in power do not strive for a high profile, politicians from opposition parties tend to heavily criticise the party in power on Facebook. This dynamic is illustrated by these quotes: "Social media is an important channel for us as a [opposition] party to highlight our views on this important matter" (Informant 24); "We as politicians from our party do not enter this slippery road" (Informant 11); and "It is difficult to defend yourself and your broad policy when confronted with singular negative personal experiences" (Informant 17).

A review of Facebook pages in the six municipalities reveal that family members of patients often use personal examples in their complaints in healthcare debates. Here, the emotional side of the debates was found to be challenging for the politicians in communities where "everyone knows everyone", but where they must still set political priorities. Local politicians explained that social media debates concerning, for instance, the provision of housing and the quality of elderly care, have led to reluctance and a lack of action from the party in power "because they do not want to be unpopular and risk losing the next election", as an opposition politician stated (Informant 26).

Pertaining to social media debates about land use, some informants claimed that the discussion between opposing groups on Facebook did influence policy-making regarding the issue of developing a new activity-based tourism destination in one of the municipalities. One example of the opposite, how social media can be a tool for influencing local debate, is the dogsledding issue. One representative in our sample pointed out that the dogsledders "were good at social media" (Informant 35) – that is, controlling the narrative and presenting their side of the story – whereas the sheep farmers were not. The dogsledders – supported by the municipality – were highly active on social media, while the sheep farmers did not make particular use of it. Two sheep farmers sued the municipality and the dogsledding organisation, and the dogsledders then decided to dissolve their organisation to avoid the lawsuit. Hence, in this case, the high political profile and agenda-setting on social media were unsuccessful efforts.

Does input from social media influence the individual representative's own political standpoint?

The representatives in our study confirmed that they do answer citizens' political questions on social media, but they also noted that they consider to whom they

should reply: “I only answer people that ask serious questions directly to me” (Informant 27); “If people appear genuinely interested in a discussion, or to correct misunderstandings” (Informant 2); “If they ask personally” (Informant 6); and “Especially on Messenger” (Informant 23). Direct questions are usually answered. Most added that they were part of local Facebook groups and discussed with the citizens there, whilst some said they did not want to enter discussions on Facebook pages, but only wanted to provide information.

The positive statements were along the lines of the following: “Social media is an information channel for me, I can register the critique and dissatisfaction” (Informant 21); “Yes, this is the positive side with social media, it is a low threshold for people to contact me” (Informant 2); “I absolutely get closer to people and their opinions on social media” (Informant 38); and “Social media makes me able to catch up on what is going on and what people are concerned about” (Informant 22). The more critical voices pointed to the echo chamber effect and that “threads on social media are not necessarily representative of average opinions” (Informant 4) and “mostly, I talk with my own supporters” (Informant 22).

When asked whether social media had influenced their own political standpoint, the informants were divided. One representative pointed out: “You are human, and you are impacted by personal stories and people’s opinion” (Informant 30). Informants from all six municipalities recounted how they had been contacted directly by citizens on social media regarding salient issues in the community, and they explained that such emotional encounters influenced how they considered an issue. The downside of this, however, was described by a representative from one of the smaller municipalities: “Debates on social media can cause non-decision making. Politicians become afraid to act” (Informant 34). In our sample, there was a general perception that the public is on social media and expressing their opinions there, and that local politicians pay attention to people’s opinions and what is discussed on Facebook. One informant described this: “I have no doubt that social media influences politicians. Most of the electorate is on social media and express their opinions. As a politician, you want to be popular, and you want to be re-elected” (Informant 29). In one of the land-use cases we examined, we were told that one party changed their position on an issue much because of the influence of social media debates.

When asked whether they believe that what unfolds on social media influences positions in local politics, most informants agreed. One indicator of this is how some recounted how they noticed that issues from social media debates were discussed in the municipal council: “Maybe not directly from the podium, but it is discussed” (Informant 19). Other representatives stated: “It is difficult to not consider social media and the opinions that circulate there” (Informant 1); “I have a strong impression that social media influences policymaking, particularly the loudest action groups on Facebook” (Informant 16); and “It is my impression that policymaking is impacted by input from social media, particularly [by] those [politicians] who want to ‘please’ others” (Informant 17).

Discussion

Politicians are expected to have a presence on social media, and, in the Norwegian context, research has shown that social media marketing is personalised, involves private exposure and individual initiatives, and is used to mobilise voters for elections (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013: 770). We find, in line with previous studies, that local politicians experience pressure to be active on social media, and that social media have become part of local politicians' everyday lives, which can be both an advantageous tool and a strain.

We find that social media are certainly used for problem definition in the debates that dominated the political and public discussions in the case municipalities, and social media constitute an arena where the attention of people both inside and outside of government is captured. Local politicians know that citizen engagement on social media is driven by individual experiences, interests, and convictions (see Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). Hence, social media is central in the problem stream as platforms for problem definition with the ability to draw attention to issues that deviate from policymakers' or citizens' ideal state. Social media is also a space for the process of "softening up" an issue, where the policy community can launch their ideas and proposals and determine which alternative is supported by a substantial part of the community and deserves serious attention (Kingdon, 2011: 127–130). Local politicians use Facebook groups to draw attention to these problems, and they interpret social media debates to determine the salience of an issue and citizens' opinions.

Our empirical material indicates that local politicians use social media widely for political messaging. They use social media in the policy stream to sell their ideas, and citizens can express which policy alternatives they prefer. Social media are regarded as positive, especially in campaigns, when even those who are reluctant towards social media tend to appreciate the political party's efforts. It is common for local politicians to use social media to make their, and their party's, views known and to test local policy ideas on Facebook. Hence, social media are not only used in everyday politics for one-way dissemination – as findings from research of social media use in election campaigns might suggest (Segaard & Nielsen, 2013) – but also to get responses to, and support for, political ideas.

There is limited evidence in the existing literature of social media content travelling to local newspapers and contributing to agenda-setting (e.g., Skogerbø & Krumsvik, 2015). Politicians in our sample are, however, aware of indirect agenda-setting power through social media, for example by posting something on their personal Facebook profile that is then picked up by the local newspaper. Thus, we find that there seems to be a political responsiveness dynamic on these platforms in our sample (see Barberá et al., 2019). We also find that social media are widely appreciated as an arena where local politicians can explain their stance on an issue and clarify stories in traditional media when they perceive that they have been misinterpreted. Hence, as argued by Larson and Skogerbø (2018: 230), the social media usage of local politicians blends with traditional communication. In this way, social media challenge traditional media as the

dominant arena for deliberating societal and political issues and open the debate for a wider array of people to express their opinions and critique.

Although local politicians use social media widely for political messaging, some are reluctant to deliberately set the agenda on social media in issues of high salience in the community. On the one hand, they must pay respect to their own party position, and they are aware that emotionality on social media can escalate conflicts and cause arguments of weak quality, impoliteness, and even harassment. On the other hand, opposition politicians and citizens use emotionality in social media debates to draw attention to local problems and to increase support for their arguments. This may, in worst-case scenarios, develop towards more problem-focused, emotionally laden, and conflictual agenda-setting strategies in local government. Regardless of position, all of our informants consider their messages strategically. They seem aware that emotionally laden and personal stories help the wider citizenship to attach opinions to salient issues in the community. As politicians are continuously “on election”, the input from social media and its influence on the individual representative’s own agenda-setting efforts is therefore likely to depend on whether they are in power or opposition.

The political stream comprises swings in the national mood, public opinion, interest groups’ campaigns, and the media. We were interested in whether the local politicians themselves were influenced by citizens’ opinions expressed on social media, and we found evidence of this in our sample. Local politicians can sympathise with personal and often emotionally laden viewpoints on social media, and some even commented that they hear the same language in formal forums as that used on Facebook pages. Social media is a new way for local politicians to reach out and get to know what citizens care about, though they still have to consider party loyalty, as well as having a holistic view on issues. Overall, we find that opinions on social media can influence local politicians’ position on an issue, and that input from Facebook can impact formal decision-making processes.

Concluding remarks

In this article, we have examined how social media are used by local politicians for agenda-setting purposes at the local level in northern Norway. We have asked whether local politicians seek to promote and control the agenda in day-to-day politics, and whether they are influenced by citizens’ opinions on social media. We have found that many local politicians do try to promote and control the definition of an issue, and opt to sell and test their ideas, on social media. They are to some degree influenced by citizens’ opinions on social media, and look to social media debates to determine the salience of an issue in their community. Many of them can sympathise with citizen viewpoints on social media. Though they may not necessarily change their position on an issue, examples indicate that it has become quite common for politicians to elevate citizens’ opinions through social media and onto political arenas. Hence, social media consolidation involves reasoning that affects the local political agenda-setting process.

We have also found that debates on social media are often emotional, and engaging in these comes with a risk for politicians. Engagement in heated debates is therefore considered strategically and depends on whether it can be used beneficially in the political game. Moreover, our study confirms what has been found in previous research, also in the Norwegian and Nordic contexts, that while social media is widely used for political communication, traditional media remains an important platform.

Our article pays attention to local politicians' personal perspectives, feelings, and actions in relation to social media (an agency perspective), rather than a perspective that sees social media and traditional newspapers as realities over which these actors appear to have little control. This, we believe, provides new insight on the impact of social media use on politics, and is an approach recommended for further social media research.

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