EXPLORING AFFORDANCES OF FACEBOOK AS A SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORM IN POLITICAL CAMPAIGNING

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Abstract

In recent years we have witnessed political parties adopting social media as part of their election campaign strategy to encourage citizen participation and involvement. The purpose of this paper is to investigate what Facebook as a social media platform is perceived to afford political parties in their campaign strategy and how these intentions are reflected in the actual actions during the campaign. Based on a case study of political parties’ use of Facebook in the Danish general election in 2011, our findings reveal that the medium is perceived to afford: 1) facilitation of direct communication to promote political interests and enable dialogue, 2) projection of an image of authenticity through informal media and 3) creating interaction and involvement through dynamic relationships with supporters. A closer look at the parties’ actual use of Facebook shows that the majority of the intended affordances is acted out in practice; however, our findings also highlight that certain aspects are neglected by the parties and that yet new types of affordances surface. The observed discrepancies between perceived affordances and actual use prompt a discussion of what political parties should consider when engaging in social media activities as part of their campaign strategy.

Keywords: Social Media, Perceived Affordances, Actual use, Online Political Campaign
The use of social media such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, blogs, and MySpace are gaining momentum in various contexts. In the private sphere, social media have become the platform where people communicate and share information with friends and family. In the commercial sphere, more and more businesses are using social media to be present where their customers are, thereby adjusting their branding and marketing approach as part of an overall social media strategy. In the public sphere, social media are transforming government practices by increasing their openness and transparency to engage with citizens in new ways, and by encouraging citizen participation (Axelsson et al., 2010). Here, the right to access government information is considered essential in order to reflect democratic participation, to ensure trust in government agencies and to help citizens make informed decisions (Bertot et al., 2010).

Lately, studies report how also political parties adopt social media as part of their campaign strategy to influence the voting behaviour and to mobilize candidates’ support groups (Parviainen et al. 2012; Vergeer, 2012). For example in the US presidential campaign in 2008, Twitter, Facebook, MySpace, and other social media platforms entered the political scene as an important part of the campaign initiative (Robertson et al. 2010a; Yan, 2011). Some analysts even attributed the victory of President Obama in 2008 to his online strategy (Tumasjan et al., 2011). This trend was also evident in Obama’s presidential re-election campaign in 2012 where a careful social media strategy was implemented to gain supporters. Similarly, we notice how social media platforms became the driver for the British general election in 2010 proclaimed as “The First Social Media Election” in UK history (Arthur, 2010).

The use of social media has also entered the scene of Danish politics where the parties adopted social media as part of their campaign strategy in the 2011 general election. A questionnaire that we sent to Danish Facebook users (a total of 380 responses) as part of a pilot study showed that 52.3% of the respondents searched information and followed the parties’ campaigns on Facebook as either “Follower,” “Fan” or “Friend.” Among the respondents, 48.9% agreed that political parties should use social media, and 71.3% believed that political parties would gain votes by pursuing parts of their campaign on social media platforms such as Facebook.

This development is interesting since it shows how social media is gaining terrain in the domain of political campaigning. We may therefore question what constitutes political participation and what might drive the prioritization of social media in a political context (Robertson et al., 2010b). Following this trend, our research interest lies in the gap between, on the one hand, the increased attention of political parties to expose their campaign and encourage citizen participation and involvement on social media platforms, and, on the other hand, the limited knowledge Information Systems (IS) scholars have about this phenomenon. Existing research on social media use for election campaigns fails to investigate what social media can bring or afford political parties in terms of mobilizing support. We argue that it is important to gain insight into this phenomenon, if we as IS scholars aspire to inform practice. Towards this end, we build on affordance theory (Gibson, 1986) to investigate political parties’ use of Facebook as a social media platform in the Danish general election in 2011. We pursue two research questions: 1) What do political parties perceive as affordances of using Facebook as a social media platform in their campaign strategy? and 2) How are these affordances reflected in the political parties’ actual actions?

To address the two questions, we conducted a qualitative case study of the seven Danish political parties’ use of Facebook by interviewing representatives from each party and by comparing interview data to log data on the parties’ Facebook website before, during and immediately after the election. Our findings reveal three groups of affordances from the political parties’ point-of-view, explaining what they want to facilitate, project, and create through the use of Facebook. However, a closer look at the political parties’ actual use of Facebook indicates that although the parties ascribe certain affordances to this social media platform, these are not reflected to a full extent in the way they develop and display their presence on the media. Furthermore, we see that unintended affordances surface through actual use.
Next, we outline the theoretical assumptions underlying our two research questions, namely, that of affordances with a particular emphasis on social media. We then present our research design, which focuses on the political parties’ perceptions compared to their actual activity on Facebook before, during and after the Danish general election in 2011. Our findings provide us with an in-depth understanding of what Facebook as a social media platform affords political parties the opportunity to do. Comparing these qualitative findings with log data from the Facebook sites, we then investigate the tensions between the parties’ perceived affordances and actual use, prompting a discussion of what political parties should consider when encouraging citizen participation and involvement as part of their campaign strategy on Facebook.

2 Social Media and Affordance Theory

Social media has become a widely discussed topic among scholars and practitioners alike. Scholars conducting research on social media use have so far studied the challenges and opportunities of social media, indicating that their utilization to some extent is inevitable and forthcoming (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). The adoption of social media seems to transcend many different organizational contexts due to the opportunities they provide for redefining boundaries and facilitating possibilities of connecting people in spite of their dispersed contexts.

Recent studies have led to new insights on social media phenomena such as personal usage (e.g., Ozenc and Farnham, 2011), organizational implementation of social media in SMEs (e.g., Zeiller and Schauer, 2011) and implementation of social media in a public context (e.g., Lampe and Roth, 2012). We are particularly interested in the latter, as we wish to explore how social media are helping political parties increase openness, engagement with citizens and transparency (Bertot et al., 2010). We build on current insights into the use of social media in political campaigning (see e.g., Robertson et al., 2010a; 2010b), but we take on a somewhat different approach in choosing to investigate the affordances of social media use from the perspective of political parties.

The increasing adoption of social media in government processes makes it relevant to look into what it is that these media afford in the contexts of both government and the voting public. The concept of affordances was first introduced by Gibson (1986) as a way to understand what an object can afford, i.e., “what the object is good for.” The identification of affordances can be used to look into what might drive an individual to adopt and make use of an object. In Gibson’s (1986) view, the notion of affordances is also related to differences in perspectives, making it possible for an object to be assigned a variety of diverse affordances. These mechanisms provide an interesting basis for investigating the differences in adoption and use that individuals can infer into an object.

In his study of technology and human interaction, Norman (1999) adopts the concept of affordances to describe the relation between humans and technology and implications for technology use. According to Norman, it becomes important to recognize both an object’s intended uses (i.e., “real” affordances) and the affordances as perceived by the user (Sadler and Given, 2007). Gaver (1991) further notes how affordances of technology enable a direct link between perception and action, and points to affordance as a key concept in explaining interaction between technology and the world around them. The influence of interaction is also central in Leonardi’s (2010) adoption of affordances to explain the way in which matter or material objects can be said to adopt different affordances, according to the perspective in which they are seen. The rise of social and interactive technology puts increased attention on the interplay between humans and technology. One of the technologies that have taken part in shifting the boundaries of machine and human interaction is social media. The adoption of social media has created new rules for how humans of all ages and with different technological abilities are interacting both with each other but also with the technology (Shirky, 2008).

Treem and Leonardi (2012) investigate the use of social media within organizations, recognizing that there are four main affordances that can be linked to social media in an organizational communication context.
In their research they take on an affordance approach to investigate what organizational literature says about the perceived use of social media, and they discover four consistent organizational affordances of social media: visibility, persistence, editability and association (Treem and Leonardi, 2012, p. 9). This affordance approach allows us to zoom in on the ascription of characteristics to social media in relation to the users’ perception of them. Treem and Leonardi (2012) further stress how the affordance approach helps us underline what kinds of behaviour social media afford, thereby creating an understanding of when, why and how social media are adopted.

Recalling Gibson’s (1986) point on the ability of multiple affordances tied to the same object, we question what affordances of social media can be identified and what implications the dynamic nature of the media have in relation to affordance perception and use. This is of key interest when relating affordances to the creation of strategic use of social media, as the way in which strategy makers and users perceive the media can have a huge impact on their likelihood of adopting them. Following Gaver’s (1991) notion of affordances, the link between perception and action, the strategic relation between the identification of the perceived affordances with the actual action that the media encourage can provide valuable findings when strategizing about social media.

In the e-governance literature, social media is being assigned abilities such as transparency and citizen-centrism (Bertot et al., 2010). Furthermore, specific social media types such as blogs are afforded democratic practice – described as ‘finding out about government’ – and this ability is making them popular channels for, e.g., the promotion of candidates and political parties (Griffiths, 2004). In particular, we are inspired by Andersen and Medaglia (2009) who studied the use of Facebook in the 2007 Danish general election with respect to eParticipation among citizens. By investigating the use of social media with respect to campaign success (Tumasjan et al. 2011), the identification of affordances for social media in relation to a predesigned strategy for use and the actual execution and reflections could provide us with further understanding of how, when, and why social media can be used strategically in online campaign strategy.

3  Research Approach and Setting

3.1  Data collection and analysis

For this study we adopted a qualitative research approach where we conducted in-depth interviews with a representative from each of the seven political parties that used Facebook as a social media platform to promote their political campaign for the Danish general election in 2011. One political party, Dansk Folkeparti, was excluded from our study, as they were not present on Facebook or other social media platforms. The interviews, each lasting approximately 60-90 minutes, were carried out prior to the election where we interviewed the web masters in charge of the party’s appearance on Facebook. For the interviews, we asked questions about; (a) what they used Facebook for, (b) how they engaged with Facebook users, (c) the amount of resources they used on this activity on a yearly basis and (d) why they chose this particular platform. We also asked them to compare the use of Facebook to other media types such as TV and radio broadcasts, Twitter, and blogs in order for them to reflect on and contrast different sets of affordances. The inquiries into the other types of media use revealed that a shared focus across the parties was placed on their use of Facebook as a social media platform. This led us to put particular emphasis on this platform through our study.

Since the findings from the interviews indicated how Facebook was the most prominent social media platform by the political parties, we chose to focus our investigation on the actual use by registering the activities on the parties’ Facebook websites in relation to posts, status updates, content, etc. The registrations were conducted before, during and immediately after the election campaign. We followed the parties’ representation on Facebook – not the individual party member’s Facebook account. We chose this strategy, as we were interested in studying how each party as a common unit was represented on this
media platform. This resulted in the registration of a total of 498 posts for a five week period representing one week before the election started (55 posts), three weeks during the election campaign (391 posts) and one week after the election (43 posts).

The analysis of the interview data was based on an iterative process of working with the empirical material along with the affordance perspective to tease out insights. Our approach was grounded in principles drawn from qualitative data analysis and involved making sense out of the interview data we collected (Cresswell, 2003). The data analysis followed four steps. First, each of the seven interviews was transcribed verbatim based on the audio recording, which resulted in interview transcripts with a total word count of 70,395. Second, we carefully read through all the interview data in order to obtain a general sense of the information and to understand the overall meaning of what the participants were saying. Third, we conducted a detailed data analysis by carrying out a coding process using the software, Atlas.ti. The coding process involved dividing the material into chunks and assigning meaning into those chunks (Rossman and Rallis, 1998). In particular, the coding was inspired by the affordance approach from Treem and Leonardi (2012); we identified the main affordances relative to Facebook as a social media platform by pursuing the following question, “What does Facebook afford political parties the opportunity to do?” Lastly, the codes were merged into a number of overall categories describing the affordances. The categories formed the basis for interpretation and meaning creation of the affordance characteristics. An overview of these findings is provided in Table 1.

To make a connection between the perceived affordances and the actual use of Facebook for the election campaign, we contrasted the discovered affordances from the interviews with the actual use patterns on the political parties’ Facebook pages. The method applied for this analysis took its starting point in the perceived affordances and their implications in order to see whether the strategic affordances were actually being carried out. In the coding process, we pursued the following question, “What does Facebook afford political parties to actually do?” Observing the frequency of posting, status updates, and content from the political parties on their Facebook pages before, during and after the election showed that the parties were more active during the election campaign period. Focus in the analysis was therefore placed on the data collected during the election campaign, as the political parties campaigning initiatives were concentrated around this period. The relationship between the perceived affordances and the actual use affordances is presented in Table 2.

### 3.2 Research setting

The research setting is based on the Danish political context, which functions within the frame of a parliamentary, representative democracy. This context is characterized by a high degree of party collectivism which dominates the political scene through the multi-party system found in the Danish government structure (Damgaard, 1980). Currently eight parties are represented in parliament, and on many issues the political parties tend to opt in for co-operation. The dynamics at play in such a setting created an interesting domain for the investigation of political parties’ use of social media.

The empirical material relies on a case study of seven political parties’ strategic considerations of Facebook use during the Danish general election in 2011. On 26 August 2011, the current Prime Minister Lars Lokke Rasmussen called for election of the new parliament in Denmark. The election date was set to take place on 15 September 2011, allowing for three weeks of election campaign. The two main political wings within Danish politics were very close throughout the political campaign, promoting their political standpoints using different tactics for debates, public appearances and a variety of media as part of their campaign strategy (e.g., road trips, TV debates and radio broadcasts). In particular, Facebook was used by

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1 The eight Danish political parties are: Socialdemokratiet, Radikale Venstre, Socialistisk Folkeparti, Enhedslisten, Det Konservative Folkeparti, Liberal Alliance, Venstre, and Dansk Folkeparti (Dansk Folkeparti was not present on Facebook or other social media platforms during the general election and this party is thus not included in this study).
a variety of political parties; however, whereas all of the parties on the left wing adopted the media, only a few parties on the right wing were present on different social media platforms.

After a thrilling election night and with a voting percentage of 87.74%, the results were in and led to a shift in power from right to left, giving the left wing a victory of 92 mandates against the right wing’s 86 mandates. One of the big winners of the election votes were the parties Radikale and Enhedslisten, parties that both advanced remarkably in their mandate count with eight mandates each; news which both parties gladly distributed on their popular Facebook pages.

4 Three Groups of Perceived Affordances

The data coding and analysis helped us identify what it was that political parties perceived as main and linked affordances of Facebook use as part of their campaign strategy (see Table 1). The main affordances are indicated in CAPITAL letters in the table and refer to the overall opportunities of using Facebook. The linked affordances are indicated in italics and describe the underlying opportunities tied to the main affordances as found in the interview data.

Based on our analysis, we were able to group the codes into three groups of affordances of what to obtain through Facebook use: 1) what political parties want to facilitate, 2) what political parties want to project and 3) what political parties want to create.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups of Affordance</th>
<th>Main and Linked Affordances</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What political parties want to facilitate</td>
<td>DIRECT COMMUNICATION; promoting own truth, communication of important information, immediate communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PROMOTION OF POLITICAL MESSAGES; reaching the masses, linkability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>DIALOGUE; timing, emotion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CONTROL; editability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What political parties want to project</td>
<td>AUTHENTICITY; likability, positive behaviour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>INFORMALITY; informal tone, unconventionality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PERSONALITY; image, presence, reliability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What political parties want to create</td>
<td>INTERACTION; activity, dynamics, reaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>INVOLVEMENT; trust, support, ambassadors</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Main and linked affordances according to three groups.

The categorization of the affordances into the three different groups of what the political parties want to facilitate, project and create enabled us to decipher the intended implications linked to the discovered affordances. However, the findings indicate that the affordances within each group are interrelated and dependent on each other to a high extent. Next, we elaborate on the identified affordances.

4.1 What political parties want to facilitate

The first group of affordances is reflected in the parties’ description of the actions they want to carry out through the use of Facebook. Focus is placed on the specific actions that the political parties want to facilitate through this social media platform.

Within this group we identified four main affordances. The first is DIRECT COMMUNICATION, dealing with the way in which the political parties want to use the media as a communication channel of which they can be in charge. Here, the notions of promoting own truth and communication of important information describe what type of information the Facebook platform potentially affords. The informants emphasize how the media can afford them to share opinions and provide their own perspective of the story without the interference and interpretation by others. Facebook further can afford the opportunity of
Immediate communication, where the parties will be able to respond quickly to critiques, main issues and opinions from opposing parties or critical voters.

The second main affordance in this group is that of PROMOTION OF POLITICAL MESSAGES where the parties have the possibility of promoting their political ideas and thoughts, and then giving the supporters a chance to comment on them. An affordance linked to this group is that of reaching the masses, as the Facebook platform allows for visits and revisits of posts and ideas. We also identified the affordance of linkability, giving parties the opportunity to share the posts with others through ‘like’ and ‘share’ functions.

The third main affordance related to what the political parties wish the Facebook to facilitate is DIALOGUE. This affordance is related to the timing of posts with respect to issues that are present and on the supporters’ minds. In addition, the affordance of emotion is perceived to allow for a connection to be made through dialogue where the political parties have the opportunity to reveal emotions about certain issues.

The final main affordance connected to “what we want to facilitate” is that of CONTROL. The political parties express how control of the media can afford them the opportunity to manage what is made public. A strong affordance tied to this is that of editability and how each of the parties view their control over the Facebook page as a possible way of editing what is posted and what is left out.

4.2 What political parties want to project

The second group of affordances is linked to what the political parties want Facebook to afford them to project. The affordances in this group are focused on the opportunity of projecting a strong sense of identity and image for the political parties.

In this group three main affordances emerge. The first is AUTHENTICITY of the political parties and what they believe in. The authentic ability is one that is tied to Facebook by the way the political parties will be able to show their opinion and express their beliefs. Tied to this are the affordances of likability and how the political parties aim for this through their authentic behaviour. Further, the affordance of positive behaviour is highlighted as something that the political parties aim at projecting through their awareness of not positing negative statements about their opponents and eliminating posts that have a negative tone.

The second main affordance is that of INFORMALITY and the way in which Facebook can create an opportunity of an informal tone for the political parties. An affordance tied to this is unconventionality, where Facebook may afford different approaches compared to traditional media for communication.

The third set of affordances relates to PERSONALITY, which is tied to what the political parties want to project by using Facebook. It is believed that this social media platform can afford each political party to project a certain image through the affordance of being present for their Facebook users. This is also tied to the affordance of reliability, as the political parties want to present a reliable outlet for their political views and this may be projected through associating political personalities to the different posts.

4.3 What political parties want to create

The last group of affordances is linked to what the political parties would like the social media platform to afford them the opportunity to create. Within this group, two main affordances are apparent. First, the notion of INTERACTION is underlined as the political parties note how this is a strong driver for the use of Facebook. This affordance is tied to that of activity and dynamics through the availability of responses and replies from the users. The affordance of reaction is connected to that of interaction, as Facebook can afford the reaction from the supporters who are following the political parties on their website.
The second main affordance is that of INVOLVEMENT. This group has the affordances of trust and support linked to it, as they are underlined as main drivers of the supporters choosing to involve themselves in Facebook activities. In addition, Facebook may also be affording the creation of ambassadors who can promote the political messages of the party.

5 Actual Use of Facebook

Above we have outlined what the political parties perceived to be affordances of using Facebook as a social media platform for election campaigns. Our observations of the parties’ actual use of Facebook, however, indicate that in practice, it appears that the political parties adopt an ad hoc approach to Facebook. Thus our observations and registrations of the parties’ actions on their Facebook website during the election reveal a somewhat different pattern of behaviour on the social media platform than the one identified through the affordance analysis. In order to explain this observed tendency, we conducted an investigation of whether the political parties actually facilitated, projected and created the perceived affordances through their actual use of Facebook. An overview of the findings is provided in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perceived affordances</th>
<th>Actual use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Groups of Affordance</td>
<td>Intended / acted out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct Communication; promoting own truth, communication of important information, immediate communication</td>
<td>DIRECT COMMUNICATION; promoting own truth, immediate communication, communication of important information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PROMOTION OF POLITICAL MESSAGES; reaching the masses, linkability</td>
<td>PROMOTION OF POLITICAL MESSAGES; reaching the masses, linkability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dialogue; timing, emotion</td>
<td>DIALOGUE; emotion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control; editability</td>
<td>CONTROL; Guided interaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitated</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authenticity; likability, positive behaviour</td>
<td>AUTHENTICITY; positive behaviour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informality; informal tone, unconventionality</td>
<td>INFORMALITY; informal tone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personality; image, reliability, presence</td>
<td>PERSONALITY; image, presence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Created</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction; activity, dynamics, reaction</td>
<td>INTERACTION; activity, reaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INvolvement; trust, support, ambassadors</td>
<td>INvolvement; support, ambassadors</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Perceived affordances compared to actual use of Facebook by the political parties.

5.1 What is facilitated through actual use

The actual use of Facebook by the political parties during the election campaign reveals that what the parties intended to facilitate is, to some extent, represented by their actual use. The intended opportunities for DIRECT COMMUNICATION and PROMOTION OF POLITICAL MESSAGES are evident in all of the parties’ actual use. In particular, DIRECT COMMUNICATION is linked to the affordance of
promoting own truth discovered in actions carried out by all parties, as well as that of immediate
communication, also identified among four out of seven parties’ actions. DIRECT COMMUNICATION is
found through the facilitation of communication of important information as indicated in the intended
affordances perceived by the political parties. In the PROMOTION OF POLITICAL MESSAGES, the
linked affordance of reaching the masses dominates all but one party’s actions and is in three cases
supported by that of linkability through encouragement of supporters to share posts.

DIALOGUE as a main affordance for intended use is found in six out of seven parties’ actual use. The
dialogue encountered in the parties’ Facebook pages is, to a high extent, reinforced by the supporters who
engage in dialogue with each other as well as with the political party. This main affordance is supported
by the linked affordance of emotion in three out of six cases where dialogue facilitates emotion,
particularly from the supporters’ side stemming from encouragement from the party. The linked
affordance of timing is not evident in the facilitation of DIALOGUE, as the posts and actions observed are
not consistently linked to certain timing but rather figure in random postings and response rates.

Finally, the intended affordance of CONTROL is visible in all seven parties’ actions. Some exhibit it
through the linked affordance of editability through interruption and notices of how posts have been
removed, whereas others display it by the guidelines they provide for the use of the page. Especially the
last one reveals a new linked affordance in that the parties can facilitate guided interaction allowing them
to set the rules.

Other affordances emerge through the actual use dealing with what the political parties facilitate. In
particular, this is evident in the political parties’ use of Facebook to facilitate CALL TO ACTION
messages among the supporters, both in terms of mobilizing volunteers and by raising funds. Further, the
notion of facilitating INTERNATIONAL REACH is observed among two of the parties that allow them to
display international support.

5.2 What is projected through actual use

With respect to what is projected, the main affordance of AUTHENTICITY is represented in the actual
use by five out of the seven parties. Especially AUTHENTICITY is found through the parties’ projection
of positive behaviour as they display positive attitudes and use approachable language and formulations.
Two of the parties, however, do not exhibit this behaviour, as their immediate action is to position their
opponents in a bad light. The linked affordance of likability related to AUTHENTICITY is not discovered
in the actions of the political parties, as they do not focus on projecting particular likeable perspectives or
assumptions but rather focus on delivering messages and information.

INFORMALITY is found in three of the seven parties’ actions as they make use of the open forum on
Facebook to communicate their messages in a more informal tone than the one otherwise adopted in
election campaign contexts. For those parties that are not acting out this affordance, the effect is a
projection of a superior attitude towards the supporters. In this way, the parties can be said to project an
unintended affordance through their use in the form of arrogance towards their supporters. Further, the
intended linked affordance of unconventionality is not found among the political parties, as they all refrain
from stepping outside the boundaries of their standard formulations and approaches to interaction.

The PERSONALITY affordance is present through the actions of six out of seven parties. These parties
project their personality by linking to prominent politicians from the party and by using the party’s
Facebook wall to put focus on the parties’ beliefs and values. In five cases, the projection of personality is
found in the image that is created by the party, but also through the inclusion of the front figure of the
party as a representative. Further, the affordance of presence is projected through the engagement found
on the parties’ Facebook pages towards current issues and through the interaction among supporters on the
page. The linked affordance of reliability is not discovered with regard to the PERSONALITY affordance,
as the Facebook page displays many opinions and viewpoints that question the validity of statements on
the political parties’ pages. In turn, these comments and statements are not dealt with in the actions of the political parties, leading to further uncertainty about the reliability of the posts and messages.

Finally, an aspect not accounted for in the perceived affordances is the projection of EXCITEMENT through the encouragement of the supporters on the Facebook page. This is acted out by the political parties as they post encouraging messages to their supporters, sharing the positive progress that the party is experiencing.

5.3 What is created through actual use

In the final group of what is created through actual use, the main affordance of INTERACTION is apparent in six out of the seven parties’ websites. The degree to which the parties take part in the interaction varies across parties; however, a high level of interaction is created on all platforms among the supporters. This is shown in the linked affordances of activity and reaction that the political parties and especially the supporters display on the Facebook page. The notion of dynamics is not evident, as the political parties fail to drive this through their limited follow-up on discussions and posts on the Facebook page. However, the interactions are sparked by the affordance of INVOLVEMENT, as six out of seven parties make use of the Facebook page to create a forum for the supporters to get involved. The result of this is found in the creation of ambassadors and support among the Facebook users who often appear as defenders of the political parties’ viewpoints and act in support of the political causes being posted. The linked affordance of trust does not seem to be created through the political parties’ use, as the lack of consistency of posts and responses often call for the supporters to inquire about the political parties’ positions and views.

In our investigation of what is created through actual use, we were able to identify one unintended affordance in the way that the political parties create an outlet for them to SHARE DIFFERENT TYPES OF MEDIA through the Facebook page, thereby giving them the opportunity to include film, posters and apps all in one place.

6 Discussion and Concluding Remarks

The use of social media such as Facebook in election campaigns is an intriguing phenomenon which facilitates new forms of public participation and debate in political campaigning, a situation that was far from reality just a decade ago (Vergeer, 2012). These platforms allow multiple points of view to be aired and heard, including viewpoints that may have both positive and negative effects on the political parties concerned. In this sense, social media are revolutionizing the public context in general and political campaigning in particular by affording a multitude of different issues and interests to appear in the public debate, bringing into play multiple content sources.

Our findings propose three important insights about political parties’ use of Facebook as part of their election campaign strategy. First, our findings contribute insights into political parties’ perceptions of social media affordances rather than looking at the perceptions of supporters, as has been predominant in existing literature (e.g., Robertson et al., 2010a; 2010b). Grounded in the empirical data, we are able to conceptualize what the political parties expect Facebook to afford in their campaign strategy. We conclude that Facebook is perceived to facilitate direct communication to promote political interests and enable dialogue, to project an image of authenticity through informal media, as well as to create interaction and involvement through dynamic relationships with Facebook users. These insights indicate that political parties are well-aware of the affordances that social media platforms can potentially bring, and that they include social media as part of their strategizing efforts. By conceptualizing both main and linked affordances, other political parties – whether in a Danish or foreign context – may take them into consideration when realizing their own social media strategy.
Second, the comparison of the insights gained from the perceived affordances with the parties’ actual use of Facebook reveal that the intended and perceived affordances are, to some extent, represented in the parties’ actions. However, it becomes evident that some are more present than others and that the political parties vary in their use of, and emphasis on, the affordances. This difference across political parties’ interpretation of how the actual use of Facebook can be carried out gives an indication that the intentions for use are not enough to ensure that they are acted out. The tensions between perceived affordances and actual use made us realize what the political parties should consider as part of their campaign strategy when engaging in social media activities. It may have a negative impact on the outcome of the election campaign if potential voters feel that they are not heard or recognized and if the political parties do not use social media platforms as intended, or do not make use of all their potential. In fact, a recent study by Hong and Nadler (2012) shows that high levels of social media activity by political candidates do not necessarily result in huge effects in terms of public online attention.

Our findings also show that a majority of parties does not fully engage with the users’ posts and comments; only one of the political parties succeeded in providing their Facebook users with value adding responses and in engaging them in the social media environment. This is achieved by being active, responding to questions, as well as engaging in debates and discussions. In fact, this particular party experienced a remarkable election, but we have no evidence that this outcome correlates with its social media use. The fact that all political parties are mainly active on Facebook during a limited time frame, i.e., during the election, makes us wonder whether they have seriously integrated social media in their strategizing efforts. Although it may not be surprising that parties are more active during elections, it is fair to assume that continuous interaction and engagement with potential voters are important activities also in periods when there is no election campaign. This observation invites for future studies in this domain.

Based on our analysis, we can conclude that political parties should carefully consider what it requires to be present on a social media platform such as Facebook. In our study, the affordance approach allowed us to identify the political parties’ intentions to use Facebook as a social media platform along with their actual actions. The adoption of social media in government processes, more specifically election campaigns, can thus be characterized as something which will require both strategic considerations and, even more importantly, development and implementation of sufficient guidelines and procedures for use if they are to enable political parties to achieve the aspired opportunities. These observations provide interesting perspectives for further research on how the perceived affordances require specific actions in order to move from strategic initiatives to actual value adding components.

Our third contribution is that our study provides a systematic approach for investigating the affordances of social media use. We have shown how other IS scholars can investigate the use of social media in diverse contexts by first outlining the perceived and intended affordances and then by comparing these affordances with the actual use. This also has implications for companies and government agencies alike, as they may gain inspiration on how to integrate social media use in their strategy work. We have focused on the use of Facebook as social media platform but encourage scholars to replicate similar studies for other types of social media.

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