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Abstract

Social media have the potential to offset existing inequalities in representation among interest groups and act as a ‘weapon of the weak’ by providing a technological infrastructure that allows even groups with limited resources to create content and interact across the globe. We expand on the sparse existing literature on interest groups and social media in a quantitative, structural analysis of both the range and volume of social media use examining a data set of groups active in European Union lobbying. Despite the positive expectations, we find limited evidence that social media have been able to reinvigorate democratic processes by changing inequalities in the landscape of political representation among interest groups. The level of resources held by the interest groups acts as the single most consistent predictor of both the range and volume of their social media use. Interest groups representing citizen and worker interests do play a leading role in explaining the volume of social media use, but the landscape is dominated by large interest groups with an international scope rather than by small, national ones. Moreover, firms also use a broad range of different social media platforms even if they lose ground to traditional membership groups when the actual volume of Twitter and Facebook use is assessed.

Keywords

Social media, international communication, Internet, political communication, public sphere

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Introduction

Social media lend themselves to mass communication and mobilization. They often play an important role in advocacy, no matter whether we look at the political campaigns and advocacy activities themselves or the efforts undertaken to plan and coordinate these activities (McNutt, 2008). The interactivity of social media allows interest groups to build communities and engage in direct conversations with their supporters in a personal and cost-efficient manner. This applies to all kinds of interest groups including not only the usual suspects, like trade unions and business associations, but also non-governmental organizations (NGOs), think tanks, hospitals, universities and public authorities.

The low barriers to entry provided by social media may create a more even playing field for these different types of interest groups than exists in the offline world by allowing groups with limited resources to create cheap and quick content and interact across the globe. In this way, social media may have the potential to serve as a 'weapon of the weak' and diminish the differences between minor and major players in the interest group world in a similar manner as one view argues that Information Communication Technologies (ICT) could help cultivate democracy more generally (Bentivegna, 2006; Larsson, 2013; Polat, 2005).

In contrast, a more sceptical view on the role of the Internet in political communication argues that social media can be seen as nothing else than 'business as usual' (Bentivegna, 2006; Larsson, 2013; Polat, 2005). In a general assessment of the ability of social media to engage more people in politics, Barnett (1997) concludes that 'While new media may offer some opportunities for elite groups at the margins, traditional mass media will continue to dominate the discourse and conduct of politics' (p. 193). The same picture may be found in the sphere of interest group politics. In a discussion of the role of social movements, which have often been marginalized in the offline world, Obar et al. (2012) explain how 'excitement and anecdotal evidence may actually be masking the reality that social media do little to strengthen social movements and effect change' (p. 2). In this way, social media may simply extend the existing offline inequalities between interest groups when it comes to mobilizing, getting access and exerting influence.

We do not know to which scenario the empirical reality predominantly conforms due to a lack of systematic, large *n* studies of social media use by different types of interest groups. While studies have been conducted of social media and a series of others actors such as political parties (see, for example, Kalnes, 2009), municipalities (see, for example, Larsson, 2013) and newspapers (see, for example, Hille and Bakker, 2013), systematic, quantitative literature on social media use of interest groups is sparse. Apart from Obar et al.'s (2012) study of the perceptions and use of social media by US advocacy groups, the literature tends to focus on the application of specific social media tools (e.g. Waters et al., 2009) and/or social media patterns of selected group types (see, for example, Bortree and Seltzer, 2009; Edwards and Hoefer, 2010; Lovejoy and Saxton, 2012; Waters et al., 2009). Other studies address questions, such as the groups' perceived importance of social media as an advocacy tool (e.g. Chalmers and Shotton, 2013), the possibilities and challenges of social media (e.g. Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010) and the consequences of social media for organizational communication (e.g. Treem and Leonardi, 2012).

Instead, we conduct a quantitative, structural analysis of the determinants of the use of a high number of social media platforms by many different interest group types. We rely on website coding of a stratified sample of the European Union (EU) lobbying actors analysed in the INTEREURO project (Beyers et al., 2014). The study of EU interest groups and lobbying has given rise to a growing body of literature within the last decades (for a recent review, see Bunea and Baumgartner, 2014). With the rise of social media, the action repertoire of groups active in EU lobbying has been expanded. We analyse both the range and volume of social media use of these groups. Range is measured by recording whether the groups were present on 11 selected platforms and by constructing an index of the use of these different platforms based on a Mokken scaling analysis. Volume is measured by recording activity on Twitter and Facebook. Subsequently, we conduct an explanatory analysis of differences in the patterns of social media use among the groups.

Even if we see patterns of both discontinuity and continuity in how social media affect representation, we find modest evidence that social media have contributed to reinvigorating the democratic process and changing the landscape of political representation among interest groups by acting as a weapon of the weak. Rather than representing a new playing field where pre-existing resource differences between groups play less of a role, our analysis underlines the importance of resources both when we consider the range and volume of social media use. In contrast to the offline world of interest representation, interest groups representing worker and citizen interests do enjoy advantages over business groups when we examine the volume of social media use. However, the pattern is still predominantly one where large groups representing an international scope dominate over the small national groups. Finally, firms also play a prominent role when we consider the range of social media platforms used.

Interest groups and social media

Social media have increased the possibilities of Internet use substantially by allowing for cheap content creation and interactivity. In contrast to previous Internet technologies, they do not simply offer 'read' facilities but allow for interaction by giving users 'write' capabilities as well (Edwards and Hofer, 2010; Obar et al., 2012). The advent of social media has given rise to new communicative possibilities for interest groups. We use a behavioural definition of interest groups and define groups based on their observable, policy-related activities: groups are organizations, which attempt to influence political outcomes. They include not only trade unions and business associations but also NGOs, think tanks and governmental organizations. Such an approach can be contrasted with one which defines groups more narrowly based on their organizational characteristics and reserve the interest group label for membership associations (Baroni et al., 2014). However, such a focus would have ignored the broad variety of the different interest representatives active in the current political systems.¹

The different types of interest groups need to balance a range of concerns in their daily work when interacting with actors such as supporters, members, the media and policy-makers. A classical distinction in the organizational literature is that group behaviour and associational structure are influenced by both a *logic of membership* and a *logic*

of influence (Schmitter and Streeck, 1981). The former emphasizes the necessity of a group to mobilize, gather the support and represent its members, whereas the latter requires groups to effectively represent its view vis-à-vis the political decision-makers. Social media may be used as a strategic tool by the organizations when it comes to pursuing both types of objectives. It serves a number of purposes, which may be useful for groups (see, for example, Lovejoy and Saxton, 2012), such as allowing them to spread information, build communities and interacting with supporters and members.

Existing research

Research is growing beyond studies of interest group use of communication technology, such as websites and email (see, for example, Karpf, 2010; Suárez, 2009; Williams et al., 2007) to a new wave of studies examining interest groups and social media. Examples include Treem and Leonardi (2012) who looked at the consequences of social media for organizational communication processes and Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) who examined the possibilities and challenges of social media more generally. Of key importance to our research question are studies, which conduct systematic large *n* analyses of social media use. A prominent example is Obar et al. (2012) who conducted a survey of 169 representatives from 53 US advocacy groups of how they perceive and use social media. They reported that 100% of the advocacy groups studied used social media to interact and communicate with citizens. A recent study by Chalmers and Shotton (2013) expands on this research by looking at the perceived importance of social media as an advocacy tool. Other studies of social media use tend to focus on a selected set of groups, such as social work advocacy groups (e.g. Edwards and Hoefer, 2010), environmental groups (see, for example, Bortree and Seltzer, 2009) or non-profits (Lovejoy and Saxton, 2012; Waters et al., 2009), and/or examine specific social media tools (e.g. Waters et al., 2009). We add by conducting a systematic, large *n* analysis of a wide range of new social media platforms, examining a sample of different types of interest groups representing the broader universe of active interest representatives.

Two views of social media use

The discussion of potential inequalities in representation has been a dominant theme in the political theory of interest groups (Lowery and Brasher, 2004). On one hand, the pluralist view (see, for example, Truman, 1951) emphasizes the ideal of open and equal access in a system with low barriers of mobilization. In such a system, groups can easily mobilize and voice their concerns if their interests are ‘disturbed’. Groups strive for the attention of political decision-makers in open competition with each other. On the other hand, what has been referred to as the ‘transactions’ school (Lowery and Brasher, 2004) presents a much more sceptical view on representation. Some interests (such as those lobbying for collective goods and representing large constituencies) are likely to face challenges in mobilizing in the first place (Olson, 1971). Moreover, Schattschneider (1960) has criticized ‘the pluralist, heavenly chorus’ of interest groups for singing with a strong ‘upper-class accent’. Rather than providing equal room for different interests, the ‘heaven’ contains a disproportionate amount of interest groups with considerable

resources. Many subsequent studies have echoed his concerns. They have shown that the system of active interests is dominated by resource-rich players (e.g. Baumgartner et al., 2009; Rasmussen and Carroll, 2014; Schlozman, 2010).² In this way, potential inequalities play a role, not only at the stage of interest group mobilization but also for the structure of activities of the interest group community by affecting the competition between groups. The key question raised here is whether the opportunities offered by social media affect existing inequalities of representation by offering new possibilities for lobbying and communicating with supporters and the broader public.

Social media make information dissemination and communication quicker, cheaper and easier, which simplifies the mobilization of supporters. Moreover, its interactivity allows groups to build communities (Kim and McCluskey, 2009; Lovejoy and Saxton, 2012). The vast reach of social media has strengthened the communities around lobby groups and the scope of their outsider lobbying activities (Obar et al., 2012). Rather than lobbying decision-makers directly, such strategies aim at influencing the decision-makers indirectly by mobilizing the public through the media, protests, grassroots meetings and so on.

It is possible to formulate two extreme views on how social media affect existing patterns of representation. One possibility is that they could reduce some of the inequalities between minor and major political players in the interest group world in a similar manner as ICT has been argued to stimulate democracy more generally (Bentivegna, 2006; Larsson, 2013). In this way, social media may act as a 'weapon of the weak' and benefit interest groups with a lower amount of resources by allowing them to do 'more for less'. Compared to print media, social media may require less expertise for successful use (Obar et al., 2012). Its cost-efficiency and low entry barriers may allow groups subject to tight fiscal constraints to participate on more equal terms with resource-rich interest groups than is the case in the offline world. Moreover, Waters et al. (2009) explain that non-profits, which lack the necessary resources to maintain a constant presence on Facebook, may be able to rely on college interns and volunteers. In this way, new forms of communication may stimulate involvement of interest groups in political processes similar to how they have been claimed to increase interest in the political sphere more generally (Barnett, 1997). In the words of Edwards and Hoefer (2010), social media have a potential to 'increase inclusion in political discourse, accessibility of information, and the ability to form and maintain relationships to strengthen advocacy efforts' (pp. 237–238). In line with such a view, Suárez (2009) does not find a link between organizational resources and the likelihood of group advocacy on Websites. In sum, those organizations that want to lobby the public but do not have enough resources to use print media, or other expensive lobbying tools might find a new communication option. They can capitalize on the fact that social media may be less dependent on resources than other lobbying tools or can be operated by volunteers rather than a permanent, professional staff. In this way, social media become instruments that move the system of interest representation towards the pluralist ideal by making it easier for interests that might otherwise be 'disadvantaged' to mobilize and actively engage in lobbying.

According to an alternative view, ICT and social media do little to change the bias of representation of the offline world (Bentivegna, 2006; Larsson, 2013; Polat, 2005). Instead, the well-known inequalities between groups in mobilizing, getting access and

exerting influence outlined by ‘transactions’ scholars persist in social media practices. Even if organizations with fewer resources can use social media, resources still affect social media just as they affect a range of other interest group activities. In line with such a view, a recent study of Swedish municipalities finds a general trend in his overall social media index for large cities to use social media more often than smaller ones (Larsson, 2013). Evidence of the importance of resources for web advocacy and social media can also be found in several other studies. Williams et al. (2007) found that financial resources were positively linked to web advocacy content. Moreover, even if the mentioned study by Suárez (2009) did not find a link between organizational size and advocacy on Websites, it did identify a link between organizational size and civic engagement on Websites. In an examination of social media, Obar et al. (2012) also point to the value of resources by emphasizing the importance of expertise within an organization. According to them, expertise and technological know-how are important assets enabling social media communication to be set up and maintained. Organizations without such expertise may fall into the ‘digital literacy gap’ and suffer a comparative disadvantage (Obar et al., 2012). Especially larger organizations dedicate themselves to setting up social media teams whose roles are to uphold the organization’s digital presence rather than relying on volunteer staff (Obar et al., 2012). In sum, this alternative scenario holds that the social media landscape mirrors the inequalities of representation described by the ‘transactions’ perspective.

Data and methodology

To examine which scenario predominantly characterizes social media use by interest groups, we have conducted a study on a stratified sample of the interest groups analysed in the INTEREURO project on EU lobbying (Beyers et al., 2014) using two sampling strategies. Our first sub-sample includes 245 interest groups with reported activity in print media outlets on 18 different legislative proposals of the European Commission.³ For the second sub-sample, we selected 300 interest groups from the door pass list of the European Parliament.⁴ After removing duplicates from our two sub-samples, we were left with 512 cases.⁵ The advantage of including a subset of groups, which have definitely used print media, is that we can control for this factor in the analysis since the use of print and social media may be positively correlated.

Dependent variables

The first dependent variable is an index of the range of social media use. A list of 11 social media platforms was constructed based on the existing literature (Lovejoy and Saxton, 2012; Obar et al., 2012; Shanahan et al., 2010) and a pilot project. Whether the groups were present on these platforms was coded in the spring of 2012 by examining the websites of the organizations for links to the official social media presences and by conducting a web search to see whether the organizations had accounts on the social media platforms, which were not linked on their website. As a next step, we use Mokken Scaling to judge whether the use of social media platforms forms a scale. Mokken Scaling (Mokken, 1971; Van Schuur, 2011) is a method from the item response theory

family often used in social and behavioural sciences to measure a latent dimension. It tests whether items are ordered in a hierarchical structure.

The second dependent variable measures the volume rather than the range of social media use. We examine the two most frequently used platforms on which we can measure actual activity, that is, Twitter and Facebook. On both platforms, organizations can post short, public messages, and they can be followed by individuals with an account on these sites.⁶ For Twitter, we recorded the number of tweets and the number of days a given organization has used Twitter in December 2013 to calculate tweets per day. Whereas the number of tweets is readily available on an organization's Twitter profile, we collected information about the number of days a given organization has used Twitter from Twopcharts.com. There is no published count of the total number of posts on a Facebook profile equivalent to the count of tweets on a Twitter profile. Therefore, we manually counted the number of Facebook posts per organization for the month of November 2013, and based on this figure, we counted the average number of Facebook posts per day. The month of November was selected because it did not involve any major national holidays in the EU member states such as Christmas and summer breaks.

We assessed the reliability of the data in several ways. First, to assess coder–recoder reliability, we took advantage of the fact that the use of Facebook and Twitter was coded twice for the analyses of range and volume, respectively (with a period of 18 months in between). For both Facebook and Twitter, the coder–recoder reliability was very high (Krippendorff's alpha were .84 and .93, respectively). Second, an additional coder recoded 3% of the organizations for their use of the 11 different media platforms, which resulted in a fairly high Krippendorff's alpha score (.79). Finally, because the coding of Facebook posts was done using a manual count, we also assessed the intercoder reliability for volume of Facebook use by having a second coder code 4% of the organizations, which again resulted in satisfactory results with a Krippendorff's alpha of .90.

Independent variable and control variables

Our main explanatory variable is the resource level of each organization (collected as part of the INTEREURO project; Beyers et al., 2014). Resources are a complex phenomenon including many different types of elements, for example, supporters, members, staff, capital, budgets, informational capacity and reputation. Obtaining information about many of these characteristics would require a detailed examination of each organization, which is not possible within the scope of our large *n* project and where we rely on website coding to obtain the information. We have, therefore, chosen to rely on an organization's staff size, that is, the number of individuals employed by the organization according to their website. We log the staff values to make them less sensitive to outliers.

In addition, to staff size, we control for a range of additional variables: first, whether organizations have reported use of print media (i.e. came from the sample of organizations with documented use of print media). We also control for Internet penetration since groups in countries with higher Internet penetration are likely to use social media more often. As an example, Suen (2006) found that the volume of interactive e-government services by local governments is affected by the number of Internet connections and

computers in the area. We use figures on the percentage of citizens with Internet access of the country in which groups have their headquarters from the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) for the year 2012 in the analysis of social media range and 2013 in the regression predicting the volume of social media use (ITU, 2014). This ensures that the data on Internet penetration in our analysis match the year in which the social media data were gathered. We control for key organizational features of the groups. The first control is an organization's geographical level of mobilization, understood as the level at which an interest group operates, namely, the national, EU or international level. We expect that international and European actors will use social media more than national ones: the higher the level of representation, the more public and institutional levels a group must communicate with. The second control is the type of interest group, where we distinguish between business associations, firms, governmental interests and actors representing citizen and worker interests (see Table 1). Business associations refer to employers' organizations and organizations of professionals, and governmental groups include, for example, government organizations and public institutes. Moreover, in addition to trade unions, the last category includes NGOs, which work towards 'public' or 'societally oriented' goals. Social media can be expected to be particularly valuable to groups representing citizen and worker interests both for the use of outside lobbying strategies and for servicing their supporters. Especially, citizen associations often do not have a clearly defined constituency and may have an organizational structure with fewer institutionalized procedures for communication than, for example, business associations. Firms and actors representing governmental interests are analysed separately because their use of social media may differ from the remaining set of actors. They will use social media not only to foster supporters for their cause but also to build up relationships with consumers or citizens. Tables 1 and 2 provide descriptives for our variables.⁷

Analysis

We begin by examining the range of social media use. We see in the third column in Table 3 that Twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook are the most common social media platforms and that each is used by approximately half of the organizations in our sample. At the other end of the list, we find other tools like MySpace, Daily Motion and Xing. Organizations that use less common social media platforms like MySpace also use the more common ones such as Facebook. The results of the Mokken Scale Analysis show that the items are ordered in a hierarchical structure. The item scalability coefficient (H_i) expresses the extent to which one item coheres with all other items in the scale, and the scale scalability coefficient (H) denotes the extent to which all items taken together form a consistent scale. Table 3 shows that all items have H_i above a threshold of 0.3, and the scale as a whole can be classified as 'strong' on the basis of the H -value (0.54). This provides a basis for the creation of an additive index for the range of social media uses. Its mean is 2.9 with a standard deviation of 2.6, reflecting that most groups use a limited number of social media platforms.

As a next step, we use this index as the dependent variable in an analysis of variation in the *range* of social media use between individual organizations (model 1 in Table 4). Moreover, we conduct similar regressions for tweets and Facebook posts per day

Table 1. Descriptives of nominal variables.

Variable	Category	%	Definition
Actor type (<i>n</i> = 509)	Business groups	30	Professional associations, business and employers' associations
	Government	21	Institutions, research institutes, national government institutions of EU member states, European government institutions, courts, foreign public authorities, international organizations
	Citizen or worker interests	13	Citizen groups (e.g. environmental, women's, national and international human rights, migrants', patients' and consumers' groups) and labour unions
	Firms	36	Firms
Level of mobilization (<i>n</i> = 505)	National	29	Organizations mobilized at the (sub)national level
	European	34	Organizations mobilized at the European level
	International	37	Organizations mobilized at the international level
Traditional media use (<i>n</i> = 512)	No	54	In the EP door pass data
	Yes	46	Active in print media on 12 proposals in the INTEREURO data set

EU: European Union; EP: European Parliament.

Table 2. Descriptives of numerical variables.

Variables	μ	σ	Median	Minimum	Maximum	<i>n</i>
Internet penetration (2012)	82%	12%	81%	4%	95%	507
Internet penetration (2013)	79%	11%	80%	4%	95%	507
Staff (logged)	5.7	6.1	3.5	0.7	13.9	222
Social media use	2	2.9	2.6	0	11	509
Tweets per day	3	15	1	0	233	266
Posts per day	0.31	0.77	0.23	0	11.07	215

(models 2 and 3) to examine variation in *the volume* of social media. Because of the left skew of the distribution of the dependent variables and their count nature, we use count regressions: Poisson's regression for the index of social media use (which is not overdispersed) and negative binomial regressions for Facebook post and tweets (which are overdispersed). Zelig in *R* is used to model the relationships (Imai et al., 2014).

According to Table 4, the single most consistent and significant predictor of social media use is staff size. This result holds no matter whether we examine the range of social media use or the level of activity on the individual platforms. We also see that the effect sizes of staff are not very different when we compare Facebook posts and Twitter tweets. The relationship between the range of social media use and the level of resources is illustrated in Figure 1. It illustrates the expected range of social media use for different levels of staff size while keeping the other variables at their mean (for interval variables) or mode (for categorical variables). The figure shows that as staff size increases,

Table 3. Social media platforms for each social media platform.

Platform	Item scalability coefficient (H_i)	Percentage of actors using platform
Twitter	0.66	0.55
LinkedIn	0.50	0.54
Facebook	0.56	0.47
YouTube	0.63	0.39
RSS feed	0.46	0.35
Google+	0.56	0.19
Blogs	0.46	0.16
Flickr	0.54	0.13
Xing	0.41	0.09
Daily Motion	0.61	0.03
MySpace	0.57	0.02
Scale scalability coefficient (H)	0.54 (0.02)	

Table 4. Dependent variable of new social media use.

Dependent variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
	New media use index	Tweets per day	Facebook posts per day
Intercept	-0.18 (0.35)	-2.22** (1.11)	-4.97*** (1.68)
Staff ^a	0.08*** (0.01)	0.26*** (0.06)	0.25*** (0.08)
Business groups ^b	-0.32** (0.14)	1.50*** (0.50)	1.75* (0.92)
Government ^b	0.13 (0.13)	1.71*** (0.48)	1.97*** (0.65)
Citizen or worker interests ^b	0.21 (0.13)	1.52** (0.48)	3.23*** (0.62)
European ^c	0.17 (0.12)	-0.04 (0.39)	0.60 (0.59)
International ^c	0.25** (0.11)	0.15 (0.37)	1.03*** (0.52)
Internet penetration (2012)	0.01** (0.00)	—	—
Internet penetration (2013)	—	0.02 (0.01)	0.00 (0.02)
Traditional media use	0.01 (0.07)	-1.06*** (0.26)	-0.24 (0.39)
n	222	141	114
AIC	973	1776	159
2× log-likelihood	—	-1756	-139

AIC: Akaike information criterion.

Model 1 is a Poisson's regression, and models 2 and 3 are negative binomial regressions.

* $p < .1$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$.

^aLogged.

^bReference category firms.

^cReference category national.

the number of platforms used also increases: the organizations with the smallest staff sizes use less than three platforms on average, whereas the organizations with the highest staff sizes use seven platforms. In this way, there is little evidence that the social

Figure 1. Expected values of the index of social media use.

Simulated counts with 95% confidence intervals for social media use for different levels of staff size. All other variables kept at their mode or mean.

media playing field is one where resources do not affect use and in which different kinds of organizations participate to a similar degree.

This picture is strengthened when we consider the effect of the remaining control variables. When we look at the range of social media use in model 1, firms play an important role. Their presence on social media platforms is significantly stronger than the presence of interest groups representing business interests (at the .05 level). The latter group has an expected count on the index 27% lower than firms. In contrast, firms do not lead over interest groups representing worker and citizen interests, which also use a broad range of social media tools. However, the most striking finding here is perhaps that the picture is not the opposite. Hence, exactly because especially citizen and worker interest groups are known to engage in a broad range of actions to mobilize the public for which social media can be expected to be particularly attractive, we would have expected them to have a significantly higher use of the different kinds of social media tools than firms, which is not the case. We also see that rather than the range of social media use being dominated by traditional national groups, it is the international groups which need to communicate with and engage the public at many levels of representation that use the highest number of different social media platforms. Finally, the level of Internet penetration in the country where an organization has its headquarters has a positive effect on the number of platforms used (at the .05 level in model 1). In contrast, there is no effect of the variable controlling for whether the organization had documented use of print media beforehand on the range of social media use.

If we instead consider the volume of use in models 2 and 3, the role of firms is reduced. For both tweets and Facebook posts, the business groups are now ahead rather than behind the firms. The volumes of Twitter and Facebook use of business groups are 4.5 and 5.75 times higher than those of firms. Hence, whereas firms use a higher number of tools than most other actor types, they score lower when we take into account how active they actually are on the most common platforms.⁸ In this way, there is evidence that when the volume of both Twitter and Facebook use is considered, business groups regain some of the ground, which they had lost to firms in the analysis of the overall number of tools used. Also the category representing governmental interests witnesses significantly higher levels of actual activity compared to the firms on both platforms analysed in models 2 and 3. Moreover, the important role of interest groups representing workers and citizens is also evident from the data on the volume of use. On Facebook, these interest groups score higher than any other actor category, whereas on Twitter their scores are comparable to those of the other leading actor types.

Groups representing an international scope (as opposed to a national one) enjoy some advantages when we consider the volume of Facebook use in model 3 in line with what the findings in the analysis of the range of social media use in model 1. However, groups with an international scope do not lead when we examine the volume of Twitter use in model 2. Finally, the degree of Internet penetration plays no role for the volume of social media use no matter which of the two indicators for volume of social media use we employ in models 2 and 3. In contrast, those organizations that have documented the use of traditional print media have a lower volume of Twitter use than the rest of the actors.

Conclusion

With the rise of social media, the action repertoire of interest groups has changed and new forms of communication have been made possible. Our systematic coding of the websites of several hundred lobbying actors in the EU shows that social media have found their way into the action repertoires of the interest groups and are used by a high share of groups in our sample. Yet, the use of social media is lopsided with a large number of interest groups using a limited number of common platforms. The landscape is dominated by Twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook.

Our structural, quantitative analysis of the link between organizational characteristics and social media use tests the prediction that social media offer a level playing field for interest representatives with different levels of resources as a result of its proclaimed cost-effectiveness and accessibility. However, rather than finding that social media are a 'weapon of the weak' with the potential for democratizing interest group politics, we found evidence of clear differences in both the range and volume of social media use for groups with different resource levels similar to what we see in many studies of interest representation in the offline world. Interest groups with more resources are able to afford ICT expertise and media outreach teams important in the world of social media. In this way, our results do not indicate that social media are a cure to offset existing inequalities between interest groups with respect to mobilizing, getting access and exerting influence.

Our analysis does not rule out that social media can lead to both discontinuity and continuity in existing patterns of representation by having created new opportunities for

certain groups. As an example, our results detect a strong role for interest groups representing citizens and workers when we look at the volume of social media use. As expected, social media offer a number of advantages for these group types well suited to the kind of supporters and members they need to communicate with in order to address the political decision-makers. Yet the overall trend is one in which social media do not represent a 'weapon of the weak': when we look at the number of social media tools used, the figures for the interest groups representing workers and citizens are actually not significantly higher than those of the firms. Instead, especially companies reach out to (potential) clients and stakeholders in order to build up their public image using a relatively broad range of social media tools. Moreover, we see that whereas the use of Facebook posts by citizen and worker groups is superior to that of business associations, the volume of Twitter use for these two types of interest groups is not significantly different. Finally, the use of social media is not dominated by the traditional national interest groups but rather by a range of international actors. Rather than having to run advertisement and information campaigns in many countries, such organizations can reach members and stakeholders at many levels simultaneously at lower costs. Overall, the European social media landscape is thus one with important differences between groups representing different types of organizations, resources levels and geographical levels of representation no matter whether we look at the range or volume of social media use.

Our analysis adds to a sparse, primarily US-dominated literature on interest groups and social media use, which tends to focus on specific group types and/or social media tools rather than consider a broad range of lobbying actors and social media platforms. Yet, it also has drawbacks which offer avenues for further research. First, even if we use a behavioural definition of interest groups including a broad set of different actor types, actors actively lobbying are of course only a segment of 'civil society'. We have not been able to consider social media use of 'unorganized' parts of civil society or social movements and other actors that refuse to engage with politicians and institutional politics. Second, future research should extend our methods of data collection to ones which would allow them to gather additional resource measures such as organizational budgets and staff dedicated to public affairs. Even if different kinds of organizational resources are often highly correlated in practice, resources are a complex phenomenon including many different types of assets. Finally, future studies should add to our structural analysis of *whether* and *how much* social media are used by considering *how* social media are used for these different purposes by the different actors. We know from recent research that there is substantial variation in the degree of interactivity of social media used by, for example, newspapers (e.g. Hille and Bakker, 2013; Larsson, 2012) and local governments (e.g. Suen, 2006). Many websites or social media platforms are used as simple information outlets, whereas others go much further in engaging, involving and communicating with stakeholders. To date, content coding of social media use has focused on specific US organization types such as non-profits (e.g. Waters et al., 2009) and environmental groups (e.g. Bortree and Seltzer, 2009). This leaves a lot of potential for studies of a broad range of organization types in other national contexts to add to our structural analysis of the determinants of social media use.

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Notes

1. Even if our focus is on interest groups rather than social movements, the latter are part of our sample if they have an organizational branch that has engaged in political activity reported in our sources. Hence, our interest group category for organizations representing worker and citizen interests includes organizations that work towards ‘public’ or ‘societally oriented’ goals, many of which have links to social movements in practice.
2. In between these two positions is what has been characterized as a neo-pluralist view (see, for example, Heinz et al., 1993; Walker, 1991). It admits that there may be inequalities representation but presents a more optimistic view on the possibility of overcoming collective action problems at the mobilization stage. Moreover, it foresees an active role for public institutions in securing access of weaker interests to decision-making processes.
3. *European Voice*, Agence Europe, EurActiv, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Le Monde* and the *Financial Times*.
4. A list of organizations with entry passes to the building of the European Parliament (EP). The first 300 organizations from an alphabetic list of 9737 pass entries were selected.
5. We also checked whether cases were in both the entire EP register and the media data set. We ended up with 235 cases from the media data and 332 from the EP register. The number for the EP register is higher than the sample from the EP register because some organizations in the media data were also in the EP list.
6. In contrast, LinkedIn is a networking site aimed at the registration of contacts oriented at professionals.
7. Following conventional practice, the regressions exclude cases listwise meaning that a relatively high number of cases with missing variables on the staff variable are not included. Irrespective of the method of data collection used, the challenges involved in gathering staff figures for interest groups are well known. Our study innovates by carefully checking group websites and their supporting documents to collect staff figures rather than relying on the groups’ self-reported estimates of staff in surveys, which may be prone to error. However, the cases for which we have staff data differ somewhat between different organization types. Most importantly, we have a lower share of specialist groups and government organizations and a higher share of firms with reported staff figures than the other actor types, which is likely to be linked to the fact that firms are required to publish an annual report that often

contains information about the number of employees and which can be found online. In order to take this difference into account, our study explicitly controls for group type in all its regressions.

8. The relatively high scores of the firms on the index for range of social media use may also be related to the fact that a higher share of them use the professional networking site LinkedIn compared to the other actor types.

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