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Chapter 10: 'Tweeting back': Innovative Political Contestation in Viral Posts on Twitter during the 2017 French Presidential Elections

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Abstract:

This chapter explores innovative forms of political communication among citizens on Twitter, in the context of the 2017 French Presidential Elections. It notably questions the degree to which 'contagious' social network communication may be impacting discourse on politics in the public sphere, related to the debate around 'fake news'. From a corpus of over 50M election-related tweets, the chapter identifies those which were most widely retweeted during the second round of the French elections. Through qualitative analysis of 197 manually coded 'viral' tweets, it seeks to characterise their contents in this particular context, in order to fill a gap in the literature and better understand how the contents, tone and subject matter of tweets may be related to virality, thus helping identify the characteristics of viral political tweets as an innovative and influential form of political communication within the media-related public sphere. The study finds little evidence of 'fake news' in the corpus studied and highlights instead practices of whistleblowing, but also a dominance of non-factual, opinion-based commentary, as well as humour, irony, satire, parody and mash-ups. In discussing these insights into the mechanics of viral communication, the chapter underlines both specific innovations linked to the technological medium and continuities with traditional offline practices, and suggests that popular contents on Twitter tend to feed into discourse discrediting politicians rather than supporting inclusive democracy.

Introduction:

The changing media context and notably the spread of digital communication technologies have helped reshape political processes in late modern democracies. Scholars have debated the importance of mediatization as a 'meta-process' (Krotz, 2007) affecting politics itself, as various actors within the system seek to time and adapt their actions in order to optimise media coverage (Esser & Strömbäck, 2014; Strömbäck, 2008). Innovations in the use of social networking sites (SNS) and dedicated online platforms for activists by political parties, social movements and citizens have further contributed to renewing forms of collective action and spaces of political debate (Frame & Brachotte, 2015), as well as influencing the media ecology with its agenda-setting characteristics. As a widely-used medium by politicians and their supporters, Twitter has become a popular online microcosm for political discussion in many Western countries (Davis, Bacha, & Just, 2016; Frame, Mercier, Brachotte, & Thimm, 2016), and a tool used by parties to mobilise networks of activists during election campaigns, relaying key messages to support their candidates and criticise opponents. With the new possibilities for political communication come dangers associated with a lack of technical and social limits: 'bad buzz' may create an unwelcome echo in the mainstream media and 'fake news' makes the sensationalist media agenda harder to manage. Moreover, the use of 'social bots' is now widespread among major political parties and pressure groups (Ferrara, Varol, Davis, Menczer, & Flammini, 2016; Murthy et al., 2016), while new forms of political communication via SNS, opening up the structural possibility of two-way dialogue, are marked by verbal violence and a lack of respect for social hierarchy, which challenge classical top-down conceptions of political communication (Frame, 2017). The peer-to-peer potential of these technologies leads to the emergence of ephemeral forms which are more or less organised, such as 'mini publics' (Thimm, 2015) or political memes (Mercier, 2015b), but which can have an impact on coverage of politics in mainstream media, in what is

increasingly being qualified as the 'post truth' era (Lewandowsky, Ecker, & Cook, 2017; Suiter, 2016).

In this context, 'viral communication' on SNS represents an innovative form of political communication in electoral periods, potentially empowering non-party communicators. Viral posts originating from grass-roots level, employing irony, parody, mash-ups, fakes, or verbal insults constitute an increasingly-used form of political contestation, and may be relayed far beyond the medium of origin (Frame et al., 2016), prompting Arnaud Mercier to qualify Twitter as a 'counterpublic sphere' in the political context (Mercier, 2015a).ⁱ This encourages researchers in political communication to shift away from the traditional focus on messages produced by party political machines or individual candidates, examining instead the innovative communication forms which are emerging and being widely shared in this 'counterpublic sphere'.

Building on an interdisciplinary collaboration between communication scientists and computer scientists, this chapter explores these emerging forms of political expression through viral posts on Twitter.ⁱⁱ It is part of a wider study based on a corpus of over 50 million political tweets collected during the French Presidential elections in April and May 2017, but focuses here on the fortnight between the two rounds of these elections, and on a sub-corpus of just under 200 tweets pertaining to the elections, which were retweeted over 3000 times during that period. These tweets were coded and analysed qualitatively in order to shed light onto the types of contents which gained popularity on Twitter during the final days of the election campaign. After a brief overview of the literature, the research protocol and results, the chapter moves on to analyse the nature of these forms of political communication and their potential impact on representative democracy. It notably provides

insights into the mechanics of online political contestation via Twitter and a discussion of the characteristics of posts likely to become 'viral', while questioning the degree to which they can be seen as truly innovative, in the light of more traditional offline forms of political contestation.

Innovative political communication on Twitter

Although 'viral communication' or 'social contagion' are commonly-used metaphors, little consensus is to be found regarding the definition of these concepts as applied to SNS, either within or between scientific disciplines (Alhabash & McAlister, 2015; Weng, Menczer, & Ahn, 2013). In the social sciences, these concepts are generally seen to have their epistemological roots in early work on crowd psychology by Gustave Le Bon (1900) and Gabriel Tarde (Tarde, 1901), later echoed by the Chicago School in studies focusing on social influence.ⁱⁱⁱ However, computer scientists or social network analysts studying the question tend to look rather to the epidemiological origins of the terms 'viral' or 'contagious' (Weng et al., 2013). They study the extent to which a message appears to act like a disease, spreading rapidly within a population by massively infecting new individuals. While this metaphor may work to some extent for computer 'viruses' which infect a 'population' of computers in a more or less indiscriminate way and contrary to the wishes of their users, behaviour termed as 'viral' on SNS results from conscious expression of adhesion to a particular idea, generally with the intention of relaying this to connected accounts. Researchers thus distinguish between 'simple contagion' (that of computer viruses) and 'complex contagion' (in the case of SNS - Weng et al., 2013, p.1). However, there is evidence to suggest that despite the multiple factors affecting 'complex contagion', the epidemic metaphor can still be appropriate to characterise the progression of messages within and across communities on SNS (*ibid.*).

A basic definition of 'virality' in this context is given by Guerini and colleagues, for whom 'it refers to the number of people who accessed a given content in a given time interval.' (Guerini, Strapparava, & Özbal, 2011, p. 507). From an operational point of view when working on SNS, for a message to be considered 'viral', both the extent and speed of propagation should be taken into account in the form of minimum thresholds to be exceeded: a 'viral' message should both be sufficiently massively spread, and also spread (eg. retweeted) on a sufficiently frequent basis, at least at some stage in its propagation cycle. More advanced methods might also include factors linked to the network architecture and usage in order to take into account 'visibility' of the tweet. For example, a less 'visible' tweet might be considered more 'viral' if it circulates as rapidly as a more 'visible' one (*i.e.* one which benefits from higher exposure given the network infrastructure, for example if it is produced and/or relayed by an account with more followers, if it uses popular hashtags, etc.).

Beauvisage and colleagues provide an early review of the literature distinguishing three approaches to the study of viral communication on social networks (Beauvisage, Beuscart, Couronné, & Mellet, 2011, p. 153). A first set of studies, they suggest, focus on the speed at which content is propagated and define virality in the terms of simple measurements of temporal concentration of attention on particular contents, as outlined above. The other two approaches pay more attention to the network architecture in this regard, either to take it into account or to eliminate it from the analysis, depending on the definition of virality which is adopted. The second type of approach seeks to isolate the phenomenon of social contagion as distinct from algorithmic or network structural factors. It thus aims to measure the speed and extent to which messages spread independently of structural effects (including key influencers, hashtags, 'promoted' messages, etc.). From this perspective, the

more visible a message is, the less it is considered to be viral, compared to a less visible message which receives an equal amount of exposure. The third set of studies identified by Beauvisage and colleagues adopts the opposite perspective, in a more holistic approach to virality which considers network architecture, and hence visibility, as one of many factors affecting the extent to which a message circulates on a SNS. They aim to examine the impact of these structural factors on the way messages spread between and across accounts with more or less influence, thus seeking to measure the role of the network topology in viral phenomena.

In the context of Twitter, these studies often underline the possible impact of social network structure (visibility algorithms, social capital, homophily) on perceived virality (Beauvisage et al., 2011; Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013). However, while recognising the importance of algorithmic and structural factors, as well as the existence of influencers, Beauvisage and colleagues underline the need for further research into what they see as ‘the blind spot of existing work’: the types of message contents which might also favour viral circulation. In a relatively rare example of such research, Stefan Stieglitz and Linh Dang-Xuan carried out a study performing semi-automated sentiment analysis on German political tweets, allowing them to suggest that positive or negative expressions of emotion in such tweets are ‘significantly associated with retweet behavior in terms of retweet quantity.’ (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013, p. 239). Aside from this, the studies which do set out to take into account the characteristics of individual tweets often tend to focus on the presence of operators such as hashtags, mentions or URLs, features which are in fact linked to the specific network architecture of the microblogging platform. By contrast, the present chapter builds on a qualitative approach to verbal and other contents of individual messages, in order to better

characterise viral tweets as an innovative form of popular political communication in the French electoral context.

One element which marked the presidential election campaign in 2017, and which supports the idea that these forms of communication are having a tangible impact on politics-related discourse in the public sphere, was the debate around 'fake news'. During the campaign, Emmanuel Macron was targeted with apparently unfounded accusations of harbouring a secret personal bank account in the Bahamas. Other smear campaigns targeted Marine Le Pen, as well as candidates for *Les Républicains*, François Fillon and Nicolas Sarkozy. In the last hours of the public campaign, the 'MacronLeaks' scandal saw WikiLeaks publishing a large number of pirated emails from the *En Marche* campaign team, including a number of 'fakes' which had been surreptitiously introduced among the authentic messages released.

Despite such 'fake' messages being commonly denounced by journalists,^{iv} as well as the politicians themselves and their allies, in the 'post-truth' political arena, it is the very circulation of such rumours, notably on SNS, which not only plants a seed of suspicion, but gives the supporters of political rivals who wish to believe them more-or-less credible yet widely-shared theories with which to disparage the candidates targeted. However, from a scientific perspective, and even on the social level, the category of real vs. fake appears increasingly problematic, not least in the French context where it is most often translated into true vs. false, including for the planned parliamentary bill targeting 'false news' or '*fausses informations*' (Mercier, 2018). The team of researchers led by Philip Howard at the Oxford Internet Institute avoids the notion of 'fake' news, preferring instead to talk about the wider category of 'junk' news, which goes beyond the true vs. false dichotomy, and defined as:

‘various forms of propaganda and ideologically extreme, hyper-partisan, or conspiratorial political news and information. Much of this content is deliberately produced false reporting. It seeks to persuade readers about the moral virtues or failings of organizations, causes or people and presents commentary as a news product. This content is produced by organizations that do not employ professional journalists, and the content uses attention grabbing techniques, lots of pictures, moving images, excessive capitalization, ad hominem attacks, emotionally charged words and pictures, unsafe generalizations and other logical fallacies.’ (Howard, Bradshaw, Kollanyi, & Bolsolver, 2017, pp. 3–4).

Research carried out by the team into the information circulating during the second round of the French presidential elections suggests that such ‘junk news’ constitutes around 6% of links shared over Twitter in that period (Howard et al., 2017). In the light of such findings, we ask, in this chapter, to what degree such material can be considered an ‘innovative’ form of political communication, and how successful is it in ‘going viral’, to the extent that it is likely to be picked up and reproduced by other online and offline media sources. We will thus discuss what forms of ‘junk news’ are to be found among the viral tweets identified in these particular elections, and the degree to which similar forms may have affected democratic debate in the pre-social media era.

Viral tweets during the 2017 elections

This empirical study upon which the chapter was based was carried out as part of a research project which began in 2012, bringing together communication scientists and computer scientists at the University of Burgundy, looking into the dynamics of political communication on Twitter thanks to combined algorithmic and qualitative analyses. It draws

on a specific corpus collected by the team in 2017, using its own open-source application SNFreezer (<https://github.com/SNFreezer>), which collects data from both the Twitter search and streaming APIs. Tweets were collected for seven weeks around the Presidential elections in France, according to the following criteria:

- the official accounts of the 11 presidential candidates (including tweets and mentions or replies);
- hashtags and strings of characters based on these or their principal variations or misspellings (#Marine2017, #MLP [for Marine Le Pen], #jamaisMacron...);
- an initial list of 204 hashtags based on anticipated topics of political discussion chosen before the beginning of the period;
- further hashtags added progressively and selectively on the basis of co-occurrences with the hashtags already chosen.^v

Corpus and methods

From the global corpus thus constituted, the current paper focuses specifically on a sub-set of around 14 million tweets which were collected during the fortnight between the two rounds of elections, from 23rd April to 7th May 2017 inclusive, from which a set of ‘viral’ tweets were selected. In order to detect virality and identify the tweets which were effectively circulating the most within the French political Twittersphere at this time, the team used the criterion of the total number of retweets during the 15-day period. Tweets were thus ordered by the number of times they had been retweeted during the period, irrespective of whether the original tweet was sent before or during the period itself. This means that the total popularity of some tweets was potentially under-represented in the corpus, if they were extensively retweeted before or after the period in question. The

approach does not explicitly take into account the relative frequency at which a tweet was retweeted, though the high threshold imposed (minimum 3000 times in 2 weeks) means that the frequency was relatively high. For reasons of feasibility, the approach did not factor in the relative ‘visibility’ (*supra*) of the tweets, in terms of network architecture. This is one of the limits of the conclusions of the study presented here, since factors linked to network structure are another possible explanation of the popularity of the viral tweets, aside from their contents which constitute our main focus. Table 10.1 shows the numbers of tweets retweeted massively in the corpus:

Number of times retweeted	Number of tweets
> 1000	1201
> 2000	348
> 3000	197
> 5000	85
> 10 000	35

Table 10.1: Number of tweets retweeted ‘virally’

The 197 tweets pertaining to the elections which were each retweeted over 3000 times during the period were manually coded and analysed qualitatively in order to shed light upon the types of contents which gained popularity on Twitter during the second round of the election. A set of 28 labels were identified for coding purposes, divided into five main categories:

- political positioning (pro- or anti- Macron or Le Pen, plus other significant figures/movements);
- political nature of contents expressed (political or not, anti-establishment, linked to TV debate, denunciation of scandals, intimacy/private sphere);
- tone (irony, emotion, familiarity, insults, use of smileys);
- truthfulness (true information, fake, opinion or belief, joke, mash-up/parody);
- operators (hashtags, mentions, links).

The categories and labels were discussed between the two coders and tested on a small sample of tweets. Both coders then independently coded the entire sub-corpus of 197 tweets, and compared their results. Differences in coding were resolved by discussion until consensus was reached. Each tweet was contextualised (links were followed, described, and taken into account in the coding, except where these had since disappeared or the account been deleted or suspended: 13 tweets/197). Individual tweets could be coded with multiple labels and in multiple categories (e.g. political + ironic + use of insults + hashtags).

Results

Interestingly, the two most commonly retweeted tweets in the corpus are both tweets from the official account of Emmanuel Macron, both containing media. They are pictured in figure 10.1. The first features a video containing a public endorsement of him from Barack Obama, while the second includes a video of the candidate shooting at goal in an 'improvised' game of football during a campaign visit.



Figure 10.1: The two most commonly retweeted tweets in the corpus of 197 tweets

The fact that both tweets come from Macron's account would tend to underline the importance of visibility and network architecture: Macron's account was widely followed and retweeted by many other influential political and media sources. A closer look at the accounts from which originated the 197 most retweeted tweets (*cf.* figure 10.2) reveals that the future President's account produces the highest number of viral tweets (13), followed by the official account of the televised news show *Quotidien*^{vi} (10 tweets), followed in turn by other leading politicians such as left-wing Jean-Luc Mélenchon (6 tweets), right-wing Henri Guaino (5 tweets), Marine Le Pen (4 tweets) and her last-minute ally Nicolas Dupont-Aignan (3 tweets). The reporter Hugo Clément, who worked at the time on *Quotidien*, sent five of the most popular tweets from his account, and a further four originated from the account of the satirical political website *Le Gorafi*.^{vii}

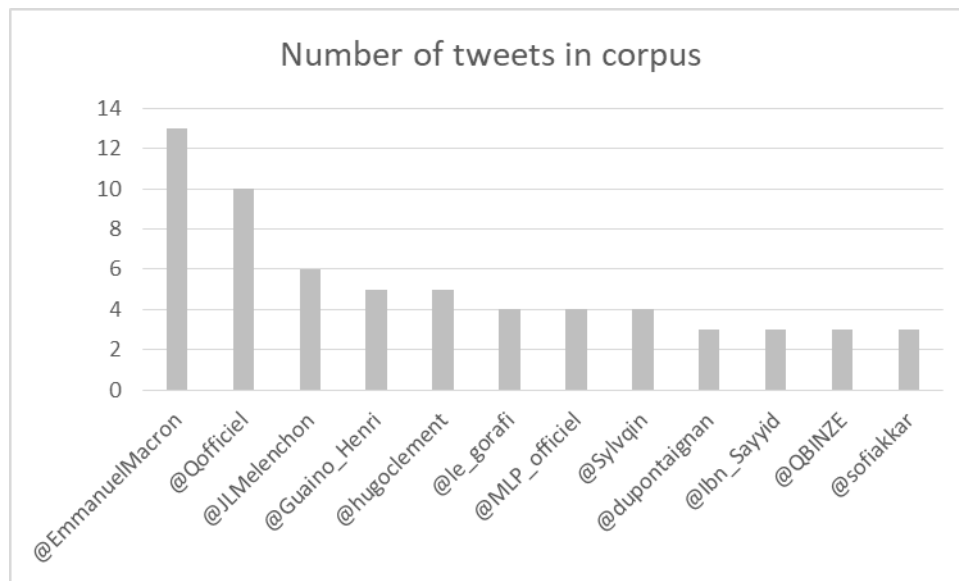


Figure 10.2: Twitter accounts producing >2 tweets in the corpus of 197 tweets

The remaining accounts featured in the figure belong to Twitter users who are not public figures, nor are they particularly widely followed. The account @lbn_Sayyid3 was deleted by Twitter shortly after the end of the period observed.

The viral tweets contained various operators (#, @, http://) and media extensions (videos, photos, embedded tweets), as resumed in figure 10.3. A tweet may contain more than one type of operator and more than one of each. For example, 39.1% of tweets contained at least one hashtag, and maybe other operators too.

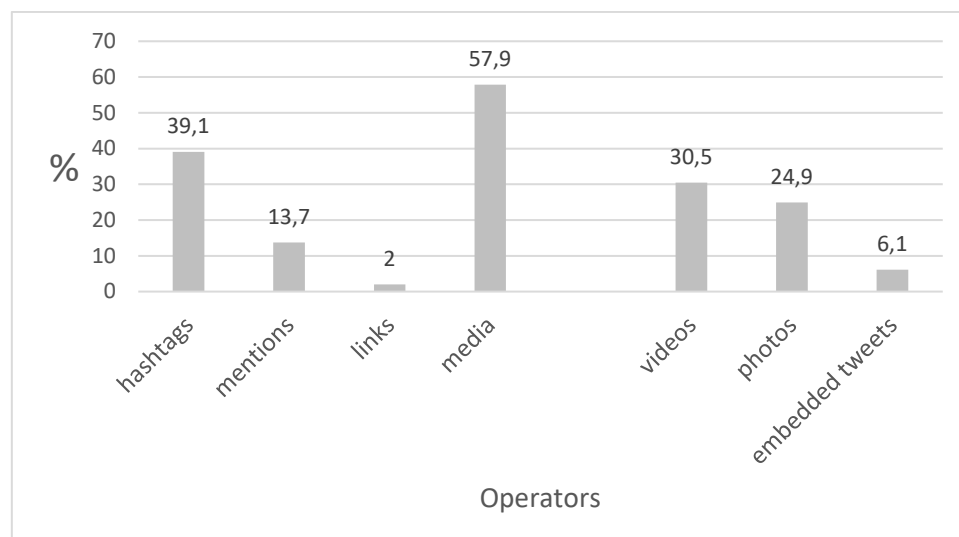


Figure 10.3: Percentages of viral tweets containing Twitter operators

(n=197; multiple operators possible per tweet)

The number of hashtags appears to be around average for political tweets, whereas mentions are relatively scarce, and there are only 4 instances of links leading to outside sources (online articles or party websites). This is drastically lower than in the general corpus. The use of media is very common among the viral tweets, however, and this category is further divided, to the right of the figure, between videos and photos (including a few gif animations; it should also be borne in mind that some tweets contained more than one type of media). Some 12 tweets contained other embedded tweets upon which they commented, and it should be noted that a further 13 tweets or the links or media they targeted had been deleted by the time of the study, making it impossible to check via the platform whether they were linked to media or to other online content (URLs).

In terms of their contents, the 197 'viral' tweets were dominantly classified as anti-Le Pen (48%), while only 3% were coded as pro-Le Pen tweets. The candidate Macron fared somewhat better, but still attracted 14% of negative tweets, partially counterbalanced by 11% of positive ones. This contrasts with the wider corpus for this period, which contains many more occurrences of anti-Macron hashtags than anti-Le Pen ones. It would appear that the National Front's strategy of hashtag use was better orchestrated throughout the campaign, but that Macron's supporters were more effective in massively spreading their tweets, notably during the televised debate, which accounts for a third of the popular retweets during the period.

Finally, twelve of the coding labels chosen for the discussion and relating notably to contents and tone are shown in figure 10.4, along with the numbers of tweets coded with each label.

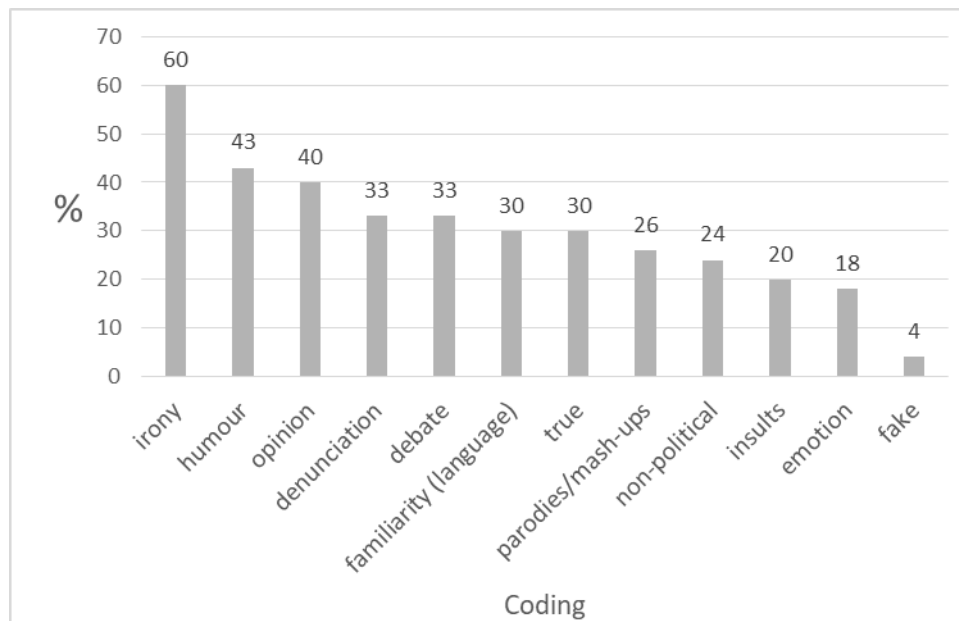


Figure 10.4: Classification of ‘viral’ tweets through manual coding
(n=197, multiple labels possible for each tweet)

Discussion and analysis

An overview of these results clearly reveals how little importance ‘fake’ tweets (4% of the total) had in this particular corpus of widely-retweeted tweets. The 8 fakes detected are mainly satirical tweets, including four posted by the satirical website (@le_gorafi). Only one of the tweets might credibly be seen as aiming to intentionally mislead. It was sent from the account of Florian Philippot, then Vice-President of the National Front, and features what appears to be a screenshot of another Twitter account attributed to a regional section of *En Marche*, in which a message calls on activists to go and violently disrupt Marine Le Pen’s visit to Reims. Philippot’s tweet addresses Macron directly, demanding an explanation. Although the tweet was quickly exposed as a fake, and later deleted by its author who claimed to have been acting in good faith, it had already been retweeted over 3000 times, in part by people criticising Philippot. It may appear surprising to find only one example of an intentionally misleading ‘fake’ tweet in the corpus, but it should be noted that this may in part be due to

the specificity of the corpus itself, which contained only the most popular retweets. An extended corpus might reveal further 'fakes' which were less widely spread, since they remained within smaller networks of users.

However, from the figures above, it is clear that 'fake news' was only a minor component of this particular corpus, especially when satirical tweets are excluded. By contrast, 30% of tweets were coded in the 'true' category. These include tweets using real footage to make their point, which might cover, for example, rival ex-candidates from the first round who rally and express support for one candidate or another, or extracts of past speeches which are reproduced to suggest a lack of consistency in the positions defended. Linked to this, 33% of tweets (often the same ones) were coded as denouncing alleged malpractices. Several tweets comment on Marine Le Pen plagiarising an earlier campaign speech by François Fillon, while another, denouncing media collusion, exposes an 'in the wings' video in which Emmanuel Macron shows intimacy with the political journalist who is about to interview him. In the light of this, it would appear that viral tweets, at least in this particular campaign, seem to have focused to a much greater extent on whistleblowing and establishing the 'truth' than on spreading fake news. However, these two categories are not necessarily strictly opposed to one another, as is suggested by the notion of 'junk' news (*supra*): some instances of whistleblowing can constitute a form of manipulation, when real footage is used to discredit the opposition, as in the two examples just cited. In this particular corpus, the register of 'true vs. fake' can thus be found to some extent, but seems almost to become a mere pretext for expressions of rejection of or adhesion to a candidate or their cause, rather than a stimulus for rational deliberation aiming to establish objective political fact in the Habermasian tradition. This dominance of affective partisan discourse is thus possibly the most innovative dimension of the discursive forms found here, and

comforts the hypothesis of the post-truth shift from fact to affect in political communication (Lewandowsky et al., 2017; Suiter, 2016).

A related element of 'junk' news is its reliance on one-sided commentary and opinion. 40% of the viral tweets studied came under the label of 'opinion', expressing support or opposition rather than disputing fact, even though one does not necessarily exclude the other. Yet the high percentages of tweets characterised by irony, humour, mash-ups and parodies, go to show that opinion and support or opposition were expressed in ways which far exceeded factual debate. Most tweets in the corpus were ironic, either using irony in conjunction with humour, or as a tool of criticism, through an ironic comment accompanying a quoted media source, suggesting a candidate is hypocritical, for example.

A fairly striking element of the corpus was the number of parodies or mash-ups: these were tweets featuring photos or videos which had been altered or recontextualised to give them new meaning, often for humorous effect. Such practices can also give rise to internet memes: one example from the corpus was a video of Marine Le Pen mocking Macron during the televised debate, moving her arms with a strange expression on her face. This was immediately taken up in the Twittersphere and circulated in different forms: the video along with several alternative captions were widely retweeted, during and after the debate. The high number of tweets (33%) mentioning directly or indirectly the televised debate between the candidates, posted before, during or after it, clearly marked the corpus. It underlines the popularity of Twitter as a 'second screen' and moreover the fact that television viewers were not only expressing their opinions on the network, but also engaging massively with others' posts during and after the event.

Although the researchers had been expecting to find instances of insults (n=40), it should be underlined that the label given here is doubtless far too strong for the examples labelled, which cover different levels of incivility, from the use of vulgar language and an insult directly addressed to the individual concerned at one extreme (n=5), to mildly offensive or derogatory statements at the other, which seem to be part and parcel of standard political commentary about members of opposing parties, though likely to cause some prejudice to the candidate's image if taken literally (n=29). With only 2.5% of tweets considered particularly insulting, this dimension did not play a particularly important role in the corpus. If political insults are present in the counterpublic sphere (Mercier, 2015b), they are not strongly represented among the most retweeted tweets.

Finally, almost a quarter of tweets were coded as 'non-political'. They made no direct reference to political opinions, focusing, for example, on a candidate's physical appearance, making jokes about the journalists' relative silence during the debate, etc. Familiar language was also common (30% of tweets), which included both non-standard French abbreviations common to Twitter but also, and especially in this sample, use of slang and swear words. Swearing was often correlated with emotional forms of expression (18% of tweets), typically from non-public figures expressing their support for or opposition towards one of the candidates. However, the initial expectation that the corpus would contain a high number of emotive tweets, based on the study by Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan (2013), was not supported by the data, and interestingly only 4.6% of the tweets retweeted (n=9) initially contained one or more smileys.

Although it is important to underline the variety observed, this rapid overview of the contents of the most frequently retweeted tweets clearly shows that the archetypal tweet in

this particular corpus is not 'fake news', nor is it a vitriolic or emotional address to a candidate or politician which mentions their account directly. Rather it is an ironic, often humorous expression of political opinion, most probably anti-Le Pen in this particular context, usually featuring external media in its original form or having been altered in some way, sometimes denouncing the words or behaviour of an opponent, sometimes parodying what was said or done. Truth or falsehood seem less important than humour and opinion among the tweets which spread widely, and whose 'entertainment value', in the spirit of 'junk' news, seems hard to dissociate from their (mostly) political content.

Conclusion

In order to better understand the political innovations which seem to characterise representative democracy in Western societies today, it is important to take into account technological platforms opening up new spaces of expression (*cf. supra*, p.) which have reshaped political communication in recent years. These in turn can be seen to generate associated changes in expectations, representations and algorithm-driven media consumption habits which effectively modify the environment in which politicians are communicating. In the context of talk about 'post-truth politics', this chapter lends support to the idea that non-factual information is indeed an important element in online political discussion. However, it does not find evidence of significant circulation of 'fake news' among the widely retweeted tweets during the French presidential elections, but rather it suggests that one of the keys to understanding 'viral communication' is to shift away from a paradigm concentrating on objective fact and veracity, in favour of expressions of opinions, humour, irony and parody which feed into discourse discrediting politicians (Mercier, 2015b).

In the light of wider debates about mediatization and its impact on political communication (Esser & Strömbäck, 2014), we might seek to situate this evolution as part of a broader and well-established shift towards 'infotainment', which has affected all types of media channels (Brants & Neijens, 1998). Indeed, the types of contents observed in the popular political tweets are at times reminiscent of traditional forms of political deliberation offline, including political satire, caricatures and cartoons, the practice of heckling at public meetings, televised soundbites and reactions to them, and more generally unbalanced commentary aiming to denigrate a particular candidate, such as might be found on a political blog. Even memes can be read as a cross between the traditions of political cartoonists and graffiti artists working on political campaign posters. In many ways, the forms identified here can thus be related back to pre-existing genres of political expression, while the emergence of polarised and opinion-dominated confrontational discourse supporting or criticising candidates is hardly new in political communication surrounding elections.

So are recently-developed technological platforms truly a vector of innovation in representative democracy? Can we say that new forms of political communication are emerging? While it is important to point to the continuity with and ongoing reinvention of older forms of political expression, either as implicit or explicit genres and references, the use of new technological platforms and tools does indeed appear to make possible innovative forms of expression through the way they function, encouraging, for example, certain types of viral expression through their very architecture and 'network media logic' (Altheide & Snow, 1979; Klinger & Svensson, 2014). Setting aside questions of visibility linked to public status and network architecture, it would appear that 'successful' messages often exploit both the codes and the technical possibilities of the medium. Real-time propagation plus embedded media or links to external sites make Twitter a good tool for whistleblowing,

in a social and media context where denunciation or even denigration of political figures, and their alleged corruption and hypocrisy are commonplace and considered legitimate practices. Likewise, a message which contains a humorous mash-up or 'photoshopped' media source, especially if part of a meme, can end up widely retweeted. Indeed, this capacity to technologically rework, reinterpret or appropriate existing media, in order to redistribute it, seems to be one of the keys to viral dissemination, as contents are adapted or transformed as part of the circulation process itself (Beauvisage et al., 2011, pp. 161–162). Thus, the specifics of SNS and their contribution, notably through viral communication, to shaping the media agenda and the discursive context in which politics happens should not be neglected.

Whether this then has a strong impact on the ways in which democracy functions, to link back to the central question of this collective volume, is debatable. The lack of technical barriers means that (almost) everyone and anyone is able to interact and voice their opinions publicly, and yet, to take the example of Twitter, the demographics of this particular social network in many countries including France would suggest that its direct reach and impact are limited in terms of the total number of users directly exposed to posts, since it is only actively used by a small minority of the population, and most of the time not to talk about politics. However, the platform's popularity among politicians and the media, as well as with other social 'influencers', contribute to it having a wider indirect impact, notably when tweets are linked to from other platforms or receive further coverage in mainstream media reporting about electoral communication. At the risk of simplification, those involved in political communication on Twitter often appear close to party-based

structures: activists supporting and relaying messages from or about 'their' candidate, while criticising opponents. This appears notably in the most viral tweets: Macron's supporters were particularly active in retweeting messages from his account, and the digital communication teams of both second-round candidates actively sought to encourage such networked activism, as did other parties.

The current study thus does not find strong evidence of an oppositional, anti-establishment 'counterpublic sphere' (Mercier, 2015a) in the most widely retweeted tweets, yet this may well be linked to the choice of corpus itself, since it seems plausible that extreme discourse could be more of a peripheral phenomenon. We can thus only speculate as to the degree to which alternative political formations can gain traction through such technological platforms, potentially giving voice to the disenfranchised and thus leading to more inclusive forms of democracy, though also ones based on de-legitimisation of mainstream political figures.

However, as technical innovations in this area are commonplace, and as algorithm-driven technologies appear to steadily progress into new sectors of social life, it is more than likely that emerging networked media forms will continue to impact the way in which citizens, politicians and the media engage with one another, in tomorrow's political arena.

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ⁱ Based on Nancy Fraser's notion of 'subaltern counter publics', Mercier's evocation of an electronic 'counterpublic sphere' characterises the use of electronic media by disenfranchised and disillusioned voters to spread aggressive, polemical discourse running counter to dominant political messages being discussed in a wider (offline) public sphere (Mercier, 2015, pp. 141-4).

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ⁱⁱⁱ Work carried out in marketing and advertising considers the importance of 'word of mouth' as a form of social influence, which has become 'electronic word of mouth' (eWoM) in the age of digital technologies and discussions of 'viral marketing' (Jansen, Zhang, Sobel, & Chowdury, 2009).

^{iv} Aiming ostensibly to combat this phenomenon during the campaign, the 'CrossCheck' project was run in association with professional newsrooms and supported by Google and Facebook. It gave French voters the possibility to query online sources they found suspect, and have their veracity checked by professional journalists. According to news reports, around 60 out of 500 queried sites were subsequently debunked by the journalists (<http://www.niemanlab.org/2017/05/the-french-election-is-over-whats-next-for-the-google-and-facebook-backed-fact-checking-effort-there/>). Page consulted on 13th June 2018.

^v After 1000 occurrences in the global corpus, hashtags judged relevant were manually added to the search and streaming queries and collected *a posteriori* over the previous seven days and for the rest of the period. A total of 354 hashtags were being collected at the end of the period.

^{vi} *Le Quotidien* is a somewhat irreverent political ‘infotainment’ television show, whose popularity can be considered to stem in part from the direct and provocative questions asked by its reporters, its mixture of political news and humour, as well as its often incisive or satirical tone.

^{vii} The name of this website, which began as a Twitter feed, is an acronym of the title of the right-wing national newspaper *Le Figaro*. Its Twitter account links to its web version, where it uses the codes of the written press to satirise or parody news stories.