Social Media Lab

SML (2022 - 2026)

The Social Media Lab (SML) is an initiative of <u>Caroline Close</u> (ULB), <u>Lucas Kins</u> (ULB), and <u>Laura Jacobs</u> (UAntwerp). The SML aims to be a permanent observatory of the communication of political parties on social media platforms.

Context

Social media platforms have become a powerful tool for political communication, globally internationally (Farkas & Bene, 2020; Gilardi et al., 2021; Komunikasi & Journal, 2016; Kruschinski & Bene, 2021), but also in Belgium (Peeters et al., 2022). Social media play a crucial role in connecting "traditional" media, citizens and the political world. As a result, they are increasingly used by political parties for campaign purposes, to inform the public about their activities and programme, to set the political agenda and to maintain contacts with civil society and journalists. Similarly, civil society, media professionals and citizens use social media to be informed about political decisions, express their opinion and interact with political actors, such as party presidents, parties and government officials.

The recent scientific literature on political communication focuses on both digital communication models, thus looking at the supply side of communication, and the activity (engagement) or user reactions to this offer (= demand side). Understanding the evolution of public opinion, as well as the expression of political conflicts, requires more and more interest in this offer and demand for political communication on social media. The systematic and longitudinal analysis of political communication patterns and how users "engage" with this content, becomes essential to decipher the political agenda, identify the strategies and priorities of the main political actors.

Despite the importance of these issues, and while research is flourishing at the international level, scientific knowledge on the Belgian case is lacking. In the aftermath of the 2019 elections, interest in the use of digital social networks by parties and politicians has increased, in particular as a result of the link established between the electoral success of parties such as the Vlaams Belang (right-wing populist) or the PTB (left-wing populist) and their digital communication strategies. Nevertheless, scientific attention has mainly focused on the campaign (Lefevere et al., forthcoming), even though communication on social media is characterized by a logic of "permanent campaign" (Elmer et al. 2018).

Research objectives and questions

The Social Media Lab (SML) aims to be an observatory of political communication on social media in Belgium. Our research questions are multiple, and are at the crossroads of the study of political parties, political communication, and the study of public opinion:

(1) How do political parties, and political elites at large, take advantage of online communication tools? What are the preferred platforms? How do political parties manage their communication on social media, internally? To what extent is communication on social media

(de)centralized? What are the differences between and within political parties in terms of the use of social media? What strategies outside and during election campaigns?

(2) How do political parties and their (co-)presidents communicate on social media? Which issues are highlighted? Which social groups are political parties targeting? To what extent do political actors use negative or positive communication in their publications? Which parties are attacking the most, and what parties are most attacked? And on what issues? Does the content of communication on social media vary according to the context (electoral campaign, non-campaign, pre or post-election)?

(3) What are the effects of political parties' online communication, especially on citizens? What pattern(s) can be discerned in terms of citizens' reactions (likes, shares) to (different types of) political party publications? What are the effects of negative/positive communication on citizens' attitudes and affects (trust, polarization)?

Results, publications and promotion

Since 2022, the Social Media Lab has systematically collected all publications on X (Twitter) from the official accounts of political parties and their (co-)presidents (13 parties represented in the Chamber after the 2019 election). These publications are coded (with the help of paid students) according to a set of variables related to the above research questions (content, engagement). The SML team can make this data available, on request, to researchers collaborating with Cevipol, as well as to students of the Philosophy and Social Sciences faculty as part of their master thesis. In the context of the multiple elections of 2024, the members of the SML regularly participate in activities to disseminate their results to the general public, and put their expertise at the service of civil society, upon request. A list of publications is provided below.

Conference presentations

Kins, L., Jacobs, L., Massive attack? Negative campaigning in online political communication of parties in Belgium: Bringing in the role of issue ownership and competition, PoliticologenEtmaal 2022, CPSA 2023 & ICA 2023, 05/2023, Nijmegen & Toronto.

Close, C., Jacobs, L., Kins, L., Different Groups, Same Dislike? Ingroup Favoritism, Outgroup Derogation amongst Elite Discourse of Populist and Mainstream Parties on Social Media, ECPR General Conference 2023, ECREA2023, Prague & Berlin.

Kins, L., Jacobs, L., Close, C., Rooting for whom? Traditional parties' group appeals strategies on social media in a fragmented party-system, ABSP Triennial Congress/ the State of the Federation 2023, CPSA 2024, Liège & Montreal.

Kins, L., Jacobs, L., Close, C., Rooting for whom? The (in-)group appeal strategies of Belgian parties on social media, ECPR General Conference 2024, Dublin.

Articles

Van Haute, E., Close, C., & Kins, L. (2024). Les stratégies du Vlaams Belang en termes d'organisation et de communication. Les cahiers du libre examen.

Sbaraglia F., Close C., Kins L., (2024). Elections 2024. La lutte contre la pauvreté dans les discours et programmes des partis politiques francophones en Belgique, Pauvérité.

Kins, L., Close, C., Jacobs, L., (2024). Hoe spreken politieke partijen ons aan op X?, Sampol (31) 6

Close, C., Jacobs, L., Kins, L., (2024). Comment les partis politiques francophones séduisent ou divisent sur le réseau social X, Revue Politique.

Reports

Close, C., Kumar, T., Kins, L., Jacobs, L., (2023). Les partis politiques et leurs président· e· s sur Twitter: quelles tendances un an avant l'élection de 2024?, Cevipol.

Van Haute, E., & Kins, L., Close, C. (2024). Analyse du positionnement des partis belges francophones autour des thématiques de biodiversité, agriculture, aménagement du territoire et énergie. Policy Lab.

Media

17/07/2023 – Research note for Le Vif : "Factcheck : Maxime Prévot et François De Smet ne pratiquent-ils pas l'attaque politique, comme ils l'affirment ?"

19/07/2023 – Research note for Knack : "Studie ULB en UAntwerpen: Kwart van tweets verstuurd door partijen en politici zijn aanvallen"

11/12/2023 – Interview for Le Vif : "En retrait, le PTB ? Comment l'extrême gauche opte pour une stratégie électorale défensive"

23/05/2024 – Research note for Le Vif: "A l'attaque! Voici les partis les plus offensifs sur X, et leurs cibles favorites"

23/05/2024 – Research note for l'Echo: "Élections 2024: malgré les attaques des élites politiques, les électeurs belges restent plutôt tolérants"

07/06/2024 – Research note for Knack: "Onderzoek ULB en UAntwerpen: "Vlaams Belang en PVDA sturen hoogst aantal polariserende tweets"

Financing