How do German Bundestag members use and perceive social media? Results from four survey studies

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Social media like Facebook and Twitter provide politicians with new opportunities to receive information and address their target groups. Yet, how politicians actually use and perceive social media, especially outside election campaigns and over time, has rarely been examined. Moreover, it is unclear how the politicians' perceptions and activities are related to each other. Referring to theoretical approaches, such as the 'influence of presumed media influence approach' (Gunther and Storey 2003), four surveys were conducted among members of the German Bundestag (MdBs) between 2012 and 2016 (n = 194/149/170/118). The results indicate that social media activities and perceptions among MdBs have remained remarkably consistent since 2012. However, the MdBs use and perceive Facebook and Twitter in different ways. Regressions with data from 2015 show that when MdBs perceived their voters to be more influenced by social media, they used social media more frequently. Apparently, politicians use social media strategically, which they have not done until recently (e.g., Author, Author, and non-Author 2016; Metag and Marcinkowski 2012).

Keywords: Social media, politicians, perceptions, influence of presumed influence, surveys, longitudinal study

INTRODUCTION

      Social media have evolved into important political communication arenas. Many politicians, including several members of the German Bundestag (MdBs), use social media. Because social media have numerous applications, politicians can use them in different ways: to obtain (political) information, to broadcast (political) messages, to present themselves as private persons, or to converse with other social media users. When politicians make use of these opportunities, social media can be a bridge between them and their voters (Saalfeld and Dobmeier 2012). This would be important because stable communicative relationships between both groups are essential for representative democracies (Tenscher and Will 2010). In particular, communication *outside* short-term election campaigns is necessary. However, politicians' social media activities have rarely been studied in this period (e.g., Geber and Scherer 2015; Meckel et al. 2013; Tenscher and Will 2010). It is especially unclear how politicians' social media activities outside election campaigns have changed *over time*. Thus, longitudinal analyses are needed to, for example, indicate how far the 'mediatization of politics' (Esser and Strömbäck 2014) or the 'personalization of politics' (McAllister 2007) has advanced or how political (online) communication will develop in the future.

      Even less clear is what politicians think about social media and how these perceptions have changed over time. Do politicians perceive that the political influence of social media is growing? Do they think that social media are increasingly used by their target groups? Do politicians evaluate social media as increasingly suitable for their own political work? Changes to those perceptions – regardless of how closely they approximate reality – are important because they have real consequences (Thomas and Thomas 1928). For example, if politicians perceive a growing political influence of social media, they may change their attitudes towards attempts to restrict social media content (Author and Author 2014b). Moreover, it is likely that perceptions

of (social) media's strong political influences also affect politicians' (social) media activities (Author and Author 2015; Cohen, Tsfati and Sheafer 2008; Metag and Marcinkowski 2012). However, most studies that have analysed which factors increase politicians' social media adoption and activities did not consider subjective perceptions (e.g., Dolezal 2015; Gulati and Williams 2013; Quinlan et al. 2017). This study considered different perceptual processes, namely perceptions regarding the influence, reach and suitability of social media for political work. Subsequently, a deeper understanding of the consequences of these perceptions was obtained.

Taken together, this paper deals with (1) change in MdBs' social media usage, (2) change in MdBs' perceptions about social media, and (3) the relationship between MdBs' perceptions about social media and their own social media usage. Thus, the paper both covers and combines these previously neglected or isolated aspects. Data from four surveys conducted among MdBs between 2012 and 2016 were analysed. Both Facebook and Twitter were considered because politicians may use and perceive these social media platforms in different ways (Dolezal 2015; Enli and Skogerbø 2013; Quinlan et al. 2017). Moreover, empirical insights about how and why politicians use these platforms are relevant for society since the quality and success of political discourses will likely increasingly depend on social media communication in the future.

POLITICIANS' SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE

Social media, especially Facebook and Twitter, have become relevant communication tools for politicians in many countries. In the US, for example, both social media platforms are politically important since the 2008 presidential election campaign (Bimber 2014). Facebook and Twitter have also gained importance in Germany in recent years: In the 2013 German national election, more than two-thirds of the candidates with a realistic chance of entering the Bundestag

had a Facebook (60.5 per cent) and/or Twitter profile (45.9 per cent; Hinz 2017, 157; for a comparison with the 2009 German national election, see Zittel 2015). Nevertheless, recent analyses indicate that the number of US politicians with a Facebook and/or Twitter presence exceeds the number of their counterparts in Germany and other European countries (e.g., Dolezal 2015; Evans, Cordova and Sipole 2013; Geber and Scherer 2015; Graham, Jackson and Broersma 2016; Gulati and Williams 2013; Hinz 2017; Larsson and Kalsnes 2014; Vergeer and Hermans 2013).

But, how do politicians actually use social media? Many politicians use social media only occasionally (Jürgens and Jungherr 2015; Larsson and Kalsnes 2014; Nuernbergk and Conrad 2016; Pontzen 2013), with usage decreasing shortly after election campaigns (Elter 2013; Enli and Skogerbø 2013; Oelsner and Heimrich 2015; Nuernbergk and Conrad 2016; Vergeer, Hermans and Sams 2013).

Like the news media (van Aelst and Walgrave 2016), social media provide politicians with (1) information and (2) an arena for political communication. First, politicians' Facebook newsfeeds and Twitter timelines can provide them with relevant information. On this basis, politicians can decide whether and how to react to this information. Certainly, politicians frequently obtain political information from news websites and conventional offline media, such as television and newspapers; however, many MdBs use social media to receive news (74 per cent) and understand what drives both their voters (74 per cent) and political opponents (54 per cent) (Meckel et al. 2013, 30).

Second, politicians use social media as an arena for political communication. In contrast to news media, social media allow politicians to broadcast their views to other users and react on their feedback independent of journalists. Politicians' online activities are often merely 'digital window dressing' (Lilleker and Jackson 2011, 107) whereby information is broadcast in a top-

down manner without reciprocal communication with other social media users (Enli and Skogerbø 2013; Graham et al. 2013; Jungherr 2016; Lilleker and Jackson 2011; Meckel et al. 2013; Nuernbergk and Conrad 2016). Despite this, politicians adapt and use Facebook and Twitter in different ways and with different motivations (Dolezal 2015; Enli and Skogerbø 2013; Quinlan et al. 2017). For example, data from Norway indicate that politicians use Twitter more frequently for dialogue with voters than Facebook, which is more often used as a marketing tool (Enli and Skogerbø 2013; see also Dolezal 2015; Quinlan et al. 2017).

Politicians can broadcast two different kinds of information: information about their political agenda and information about themselves as political or private persons (van Aelst and Walgrave 2016). The latter especially is a form of self-promotion, which has been discussed in the context of the 'personalization of politics' (Adam and Maier 2010; McAllister 2007; van Aelst, Sheafer and Stanyer 2012). According to this approach, there is an ongoing shift of (media) attention from political parties and institutions to individual politicians (e.g., McAllister 2007). The increasing number of politicians using social media to communicate more or less independently from their party is one indicator of this shift (Enli and Skogerbø 2013).

Although research indicates that the social media profiles of MdBs are less personalized than those of US Congress members (Geber and Scherer 2015), it remains unclear how intensively MdBs use social media for self-promotion, especially outside election campaigns, and how their social media usage has changed in recent years. Thus, the following research question was formulated:

Research Question 1 (RQ1): How has the Bundestag members' Facebook and Twitter usage changed in the period between 2012 to 2016?

POLITICIANS' PERCEPTIONS ABOUT SOCIAL MEDIA

Currently, little is known about politicians' perceptions regarding (social) media. Politicians are likely most often surveyed about their media-related perceptions in the context of the 'mediatization of politics' hypothesis (Esser and Strömbäck 2014). As this hypothesis states that the media have an increasing influence on 'political processes, institutions, organizations and actors' (Strömbäck and Esser 2014, 6), politicians' perceptions regarding the influence of the media are focussed by these studies. Studies conducted in this context have indicated that (German) politicians perceive media influence to be (too) strong, exerting more influence on politics than the other way around (Fawzi 2017; Kepplinger 2009; Pfetsch and Mayerhöffer 2011; Pontzen 2013; Strömbäck 2011; van Aelst et al. 2008). According to some of these studies, politicians even assume that mass media have more influence on the political agenda than they themselves, other politicians, or government representatives do (Pontzen 2013, 195; Strömbäck 2011; van Aelst and Walgrave 2011; however, research has also shown that political actors tend to overestimate the influence of media on surveys; van Aelst and Walgrave 2011).

Only a few studies have considered politicians' perceptions of online media, particularly social media. These studies suggest that politicians perceive such media as important for election campaigns (Pontzen 2013; Segaard 2015) and suitable for their political work (Tenscher and Will 2010). While politicians do not believe it is possible to win elections with online campaigns, they do believe it is possible to lose elections without them (Zittel 2009). Moreover, politicians do not attribute the same political influence to all (online) media. For example, traditional mass media like television or newspaper are believed to be more influential than news websites, which in turn are believed to have more influence than social media (Pontzen 2013, 211). Facebook is perceived to be more important than Twitter (Quinlan et al. 2017). In one of the few longitudinal studies in this research field, Pontzen (2013) showed that German-speaking parliamentarians at the state, national and European levels perceived a remarkable increase of the

influence of (online) media from 2005 to 2011. More recently, however, Author and Author (2014a) showed that the MdBs' perceptions regarding the influence of several online media channels did not change notably from 2012 to 2013.

More longitudinal studies of politicians' perceptions are needed, especially since mediatization is seen as a temporal process (Esser and Strömbäck 2014). As social media can be used to address different groups (Metag and Marcinkowski 2012), such longitudinal studies should also consider politicians' perceptions about the influence of social media on various target groups. Moreover, politicians' perceptions about the reach as well as perceptions about the suitability of social media for their own political work should be considered (Tenscher and Will 2010). Finally, as politicians have different perceptions regarding Facebook and Twitter (Enli and Skogerbø 2013; Quinlan et al. 2017), it has to be differentiated between various social media. Thus, the following research question was formulated:

Research Question 2 (RQ2): How did Bundestag members' perceptions about Facebook and Twitter change between 2012 to 2016?

THE INFLUENCE OF POLITICANS' PERCEPTIONS ON THEIR SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE

The underlying assumption about the influence of politicians' perceptions on their activities is that politicians are rational actors who use (social) media in order to archive their goals (Geber and Scherer 2015; Quinlan et al. 2017; van Aelst and Walgrave 2016). Generally speaking, politicians' main objectives should be to maximise votes, retain office and push ahead their agendas (Strom 1990). Thus, following the influence of presumed influence approach (Gunther and Storey 2003), politicians should use social media more intensively when they perceive their target groups to be more influenced by social media content. For example,

politicians increase their media-related efforts in the offline world when they perceive that voters are more strongly influenced by offline media (Cohen, Tsfati and Sheafer 2008).

To be influenced by politicians' social media content, the target groups must actually receive this content. Thus, politicians' perceptions regarding the reach of their content as well as the size and structure of their audience ('imagined audience', Litt 2012; Marwick and boyd 2010) should also have consequences on their social media activities. In other words, the more politicians believe that their target groups use a specific social medium, the more they will use it themselves as a communication tool.

Social media provide politicians with the opportunity to broadcast tailored information to their target groups (Hoffmann and Suphan 2017). For several reasons, their voters, the general public, journalists as well as other politicians should be important target groups. Assuming parliamentarians want to be re-elected, they must convince their former voters and other voters ('the general public') to vote for them in the next election. Through social media, they can directly address these groups without depending on mass media and its gatekeeping function ('disintermediation', Gellman 1996). Surveys indicate that the need to reach potential voters was the strongest motivation for members of the German Bundestag to use social media in 2012 (Meckel et al. 2013, 30). Admittedly, as only one-tenth of German Internet users follow at least one politician or party on social media (Hölig and Hasebrink 2017), MdBs reached only a fraction of their voters and other citizens directly. Nevertheless, both groups can receive information from politicians incidentally via, for example, likes, shares or comments made by friends ('trap effect', Flemming and Marcinkowski 2016).

However, (German) citizens and voters more frequently receive political information from mass media than from social media (Hölig and Hasebrink 2017; for international comparison, see Newman et al. 2017). Thus, it is reasonable for politicians to try to get in mass

media, which makes journalists to a relevant target group for them. Because social media, particularly Twitter, are very popular among journalists (Neuberger, Langenohl and Nuernbergk 2014) and journalists increasingly incorporate social media content in their work (Broersma and Graham 2013; Paulussen and Harder 2014), it is also reasonable for politicians to provide quotable 'soundbites' on their social media profiles with journalists in mind (Adi, Erickson and Lilleker 2014). Indeed, politicians perceive online media to be crucial for feeding conventional media with information (Pontzen 2013, 253, 315-316).

Other politicians are another relevant target group. On the one hand, in party-centred political systems such as Germany, political parties and their members primarily determine the chances of any one politician getting a parliamentary seat by deciding about politician's position on the party list. German politicians are aware of this and accordingly perceive that 'relationships within one's own party' are the most important factor for political success (Pontzen 2013, 201). On the other hand, many politicians use social media to understand the motivations of their political opponents (Meckel et al. 2013, 30). Based on this information, politicians can decide how to deal with or respond to their opponents' social media content. Consequently, studies have shown that politicians are strongly connected to other politicians on Twitter (e.g., Nuernbergk and Conrad 2016).

Taken together, politicians should communicate via social media more intensively, the more they perceived that they could reach and influence their relevant target groups. Moreover, politicians should primarily use social media when they perceive such media to be suitable for their political work. However, it remains unclear whether these perceptions affect politicians' actual social media activities.

Whereas the perceived suitability of social media was an important explanatory factor for politicians' communication activities in some studies (Author and Author 2014a; Author,

Author, and non-Author 2016; Author and Author 2015), the impact of the perceived reach of Facebook and Twitter among different groups has not yet been systematically tested. The empirical evidence regarding the relationship between politicians' perceived media influences and their media activities is mixed. On the one hand, Cohen, Tsfati and Sheafer (2008) showed that politicians' perceptions about the influence of the offline media on the general public have an impact on their own offline media activities, while perceptions regarding the influence of the offline media on other politicians played no role. On the other hand, Author, Author and non-Author (2016) and Metag and Marcinkowski (2012) indicated that the presumed influence of social media on other politicians partially affected politicians' social media activities, while the presumed influence on the general public and other voters was unimportant. Moreover, Author and Author (2015) showed that the perceptions of local German politicians about the influence of social media on journalists influenced their own social media activities, while their perceptions about the influence of social media on the public and on other politicians had no influence.

To test the impact of perceptions on social media activities, the following research question was formulated:

Research Question 3 (RQ3): To what extent do Bundestag members' perceptions about the influence, the reach and the suitability of Facebook and Twitter influence their own communication activities on Facebook and Twitter?

METHOD

Procedure and Sample

To answer the research questions, each two standardised surveys were conducted among members of the 17th (spring 2012 and 2013) and 18th German Bundestag (spring 2015 and 2016). At the time of the surveys, no national elections or other specific events were occurring that could have distorted the responses of the MdBs.

All MdBs were personally invited via letter to participate in the surveys. The survey and a stamped return envelope were enclosed. The MdBs were also able to complete the survey online. At two and four weeks after the invitation, a reminder email was sent.

In 2012, 194 members of the 17th German Bundestag participated in the survey (response rate: 31.3 per cent), while 149 MdBs took part in 2013 (response rate: 24.0 per cent). In 2015, 170 members of the 18th German Bundestag participated (response rate: 27.0 per cent), while 118 MdBs participated in 2016 (response rate: 18.6 per cent). The response rates for the surveys were similar to those of other surveys among MdBs (e.g., Meckel et al. 2013; Pontzen 2013; Tenscher and Will 2010). However, as in other longitudinal studies (e.g., Best et al. 2010), there is a decreasing willingness to participate over time.

[Table 1]

Although the response rates varied over time, the samples were not biased with respect to sex and age (see Table 1). With respect to party affiliation, the 2012 sample fitted well to the entire Bundestag. In 2013, 2015 and 2016, parliamentarians of the CDU/CSU were underrepresented. Likewise, Social Democrats were overrepresented in 2013 and 2016, while members of the Left Party were overrepresented in 2015 and 2016.

Measures

MdBs' social media activities. To measure the information function of social media, MdBs were asked in each survey how often they used Facebook and Twitter to obtain political information. To measure the arena function of social media, MdBs were asked in each survey how often they used Facebook and Twitter to broadcast information about their political work. In the 2015 and 2016 surveys, they were additionally asked how often they used Facebook and

Twitter to broadcast information about their everyday lives.[1] All items were measured on a five-level scale. Because the scales were adjusted in 2015 (from 1 = *never* to 5 = *daily* [information function] and 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *very intensive* [arena function] to 1 = *never* to 5 = *very frequently*), only comparisons among members of the 17th German Bundestag and comparisons among members of the 18th German Bundestag were possible.

MdBs' perceptions about social media. To measure the perceived influence of social media, MdBs were asked in each survey how strongly they believed the political influence of (1) Facebook and (2) Twitter to be on the general public, journalists, and other politicians. In 2015 and 2016, the MdBs were asked to assess the political influence of Facebook and Twitter on their own voters. All items were measured on a five-level scale (1 = *no influence* to 5 = *very strong influence*).

To measure the perceived reach of social media, the MdBs were asked in each survey to estimate how many people in Germany used Facebook and Twitter to receive political information. Additionally, in 2015 and 2016, they were asked to estimate how many journalists, politicians, and their own voters used Facebook and Twitter to receive political information. Again, all items were measured on a five-level scale; and again, the scales were adjusted in 2015 (from 1 = *very few people* to 5 = *very many people* to 1 = *almost no one* to 5 = *almost all*).

To measure the perceived suitability of social media, the MdBs were asked in each survey how suitable they considered Facebook and Twitter to be for getting political information. In 2015 and 2016, they were also asked how suitable they considered Facebook and Twitter to be

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[1] This item can be seen as one indicator for the personalization of politics, although it does not consider all dimensions of personalization (see, e.g., van Aelst, Sheafer and Stanyer 2012).

for broadcasting information about their own political work. All items were measured on a five-level scale (1 = *not suitable at all* to 5 = *very suitable*).

RESULTS

MdBs' Social Media Activities

 RQ1 asked how the MdBs' social media usage changed in the period between 2012 to 2016. According to their answers, the MdBs' Facebook and Twitter activities were relatively constant (Table 2).

 [Table 2]

 Using Facebook and Twitter to receive political information did not increase over time. Facebook was occasionally used for obtaining political information, and Twitter even less so.[2] Facebook usage by MdBs for broadcasting information about their own political work changed slightly, increasing between 2012 and 2013 and remaining consistent between 2015 and 2016 at a high level. In contrast, using Twitter to broadcast information remained at a consistently lower level. In 2015 and 2016, the MdBs were also asked how often they broadcasted information about their everyday lives via Facebook and Twitter, with the results indicating that they rarely used Facebook and Twitter for this purpose.

 To summarise and answer *RQ1*: The MdBs' social media usage changed slowly. Only minor changes were observed from 2012 to 2013 and from 2015 to 2016.

MdBs' Perceptions About Social Media

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[2] For comparison, the MdBs were also asked how often they used news websites to get political information. The results indicate frequent use of news websites (2012: M = 4.58, SD = .76, n = 192; 2013: M = 4.52, SD = .80, n = 149 [1 = *never* to 5 = *daily*]; 2015: M = 3.82, SD = 1.13, n = 169; 2016: M = 4.15, SD = .92, n = 118 [1 = *never* to 5 = *very frequently*]).

RQ2 focused on the MdBs' perceptions about social media: How have these perceptions changed between 2012 to 2016? To answer this question, the parliamentarians' perceptions regarding the influence, reach and suitability of Facebook and Twitter were analysed over time.

Perceived political influence. The perceived political influence of Facebook and Twitter on the general public, journalists, politicians and MdBs' own voters remained constant between 2012 and 2016 (see Table 3). In most instances, the MdBs perceived Facebook to have a stronger influence on their target groups than Twitter. In 2015 and 2016, however, they perceived Twitter to have a stronger influence than Facebook on journalists as well as (only in 2016) on other politicians.

[Table 3]

Perceived reach. According to the MdBs' perceptions, the reach of Facebook and Twitter in terms of obtaining political information has changed slowly (see Table 4). The most considerable changes over time can be observed when looking at the parliamentarians' perceptions about the reach of Facebook and Twitter among journalists, most of which viewed Facebook and Twitter as more central to journalists for getting political information in 2016 than one year before. Regarding the perceived reach of Facebook and Twitter among politicians, the general public, and own voters, the MdBs did not perceive notable changes. Furthermore, the results indicate that the MdBs viewed Twitter as an 'elite' medium because they assume that politicians and journalists use it much more frequently than the general public and their own voters.

[Table 4]

Perceived suitability. Following the MdBs' perceptions, the suitability of Twitter to obtain political information increased over time (see Table 5). In 2016, Twitter was rated just as

suitable as Facebook for obtaining political information. In contrast, Facebook was evaluated as more suitable than Twitter for broadcasting information about MdBs' own political work.

[Table 5]

To summarise and answer *RQ2*: The perceptions of the MdBs regarding the political influence, reach and suitability of Facebook and Twitter only slightly and partially changed between 2012 and 2016.

Influence of MdBs' Social Media Perceptions on Their Social Media Usage

To test the third research question, hierarchical linear regression analyses were calculated with the data from the 2015 survey. These data were used because similar analyses with data from members of the 17th German Bundestag were already conducted (Author, Author and non-Author 2016), and the response rate among members of the 18th German Bundestag was higher in 2015 than it was in 2016.

The perceptions of the MdBs about the political influence, reach and suitability of Facebook and Twitter served as independent variables.[3] The frequency of the MdBs' Facebook and Twitter usage to broadcast information about their own political work and everyday lives served as dependent variables. Several sociodemographic variables (sex, age, education) and party affiliation were considered as control variables because several studies have indicated that these factors affect politicians' social media usage (e.g., Larsson and Kalsnes 2014; Meckel et al. 2013; Vergeer and Hermans 2013).

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[3] The various perceptions are related to each other. However, bivariate analyses indicated only a moderate relationship on average (r = .27). Moreover, as the statistics show that all tolerance values are above .30 and all variance inflation factors (VIF) are below 3.50, there should be no problem with multicollinearity.

The results of the regression analyses (see Table 6) indicate that the perceived influence of Facebook and Twitter partially influenced the MdBs' social media activities, albeit the explanatory power was small. The more MdBs perceived their own voters to be influenced by Facebook, the more frequently they broadcasted information about their own political work and everyday lives via Facebook. Moreover, they used Twitter more frequently for broadcasting information about their everyday lives the more they perceived their own voters and other politicians to be influenced by the microblogging service. However, these effects miss the statistical significance of five per cent (p = .051 and p = .097). In contrast, perceptions regarding the political influence of Facebook and Twitter on journalists and the general public had no influence on the parliamentarians' social media activities. The MdBs' perceptions about the reach of Facebook and Twitter among the general public, journalists, politicians, and their own voters also had no influence on their social media activities. However, perceived suitability did have an influence: The more suitable MdBs rated Facebook and Twitter for broadcasting information about their own political work, the more often they broadcast this information via Facebook and Twitter. The effect size and explanatory power of perceived suitability was strong in comparison to the other variables.[4]

[Table 6]

To summarise and answer *RQ3*: The Facebook and Twitter activities of the MdBs were partly influenced by the perceived political influence of Facebook and Twitter, not influenced by

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[4] Similar regressions were conducted with the data from 2012 and 2013 (Author, Author and non-Author 2016) as well as with the data from 2016. The results of the 2016 regressions indicate that the MdBs' perceived influences of Facebook and Twitter on their voters have the strongest impact on their social media activities (ß = .20-.23) compared to their perceived influences both media on other groups. However, the effects miss statistical significance, probably because of the small sample size (n = 84–107). Moreover, the politicians' perceived reach of Twitter among their own voters influenced the frequency of information broadcast about their everyday lives (ß = .21, p < .05). Similar to 2015, the perceived suitability of Twitter had an impact on the frequency of broadcast information about their own political work (ß = .15, p < .05).

the perceived reach of Facebook and Twitter, and strongly influenced by the perceived suitability of both tools.

DISCUSSION

Social media are often attributed great potential to enliven political discourse, strengthen the relationship between representatives and citizens, and make political processes more transparent (e.g., Meckel et al. 2013; Saalfeld and Dobmeier 2012; Unger 2012). Whether this potential is actually realised depends primarily on whether and how politicians use social media as well as on the underlying perceptions responsible for these decisions. The present study addressed these questions by analysing the use and perceptions of Facebook and Twitter by members of the German Bundestag outside election campaigns from 2012 to 2016. Thus, this study provides a unique insight into how politicians' social media usage and perceptions about social media have changed over time.

The findings show that Facebook in particular is used intensively by many MdBs, especially to obtain political information and broadcast information about their own political work. In contrast, Facebook and particularly Twitter were only rarely used to broadcast information about their everyday lives. This is in line with previous results (Geber and Scherer 2015) and indicates that intensive 'personalization of politics' (McAllister 2007) in this respect is not common among the MdBs' social media communication.

It is striking that Facebook and Twitter activities remained largely constant from 2012 to 2016. On the one hand, this consistent pattern was unexpected because the (political) online world has changed significantly in recent years. For example, mobile messenger services like WhatsApp and photo communities like Instagram have achieved prominence and have made social media communication more visible (Newman et al. 2017), while traditional mass media

has increasingly incorporated social media content (Broersma and Graham 2013; Paulussen and Harder 2014); additionally, several (online) media sources are increasingly used at the same time ('second screening', Gil de Zúñiga and Liu 2017). On the other hand, the results could be explained by the fact that Facebook and Twitter were already the most prominent social media used by MdBs since at least the national elections in 2013 (Hinz 2017). It is likely only few MdBs initially registered on Facebook or Twitter during the survey period. Those who have used Facebook and Twitter since 2012 may have established consistent routines that do not vary from one year to another. Another reason for the consistent results could be that the measurement of the social media activities was slightly adjusted in 2015, making comparisons between the results of the surveys among members of the 17th German Bundestag and those of members of the 18th German Bundestag difficult. Ultimately, adjusting the measurement could have obscured potential changes.

Also, perceptions by MdBs regarding the political influence, reach and suitability of Facebook and Twitter hardly changed between 2012 and 2016. Thus, there was no indication that the MdBs perceived a rapidly increasing mediatization of politics when thinking about the relevance of social media. Again, a possible explanation could be that Facebook and Twitter were already well established in 2012 and MdBs have not changed their perceptions regarding social media from year to year. Notably, the mechanisms and functions of Facebook and Twitter for their users also did not change noteworthy since 2012. However, while the number of German Twitter users has stagnated at one to two per cent of the population (Koch and Frees 2016), the number of German Facebook users has increased from 20 million in 2012 to 28 million in 2016 according to the official Facebook Newsroom website dated 18 February 2016 (see also Koch and Frees 2016). This remarkable increase of users has not yet been acknowledged by MdBs.

But what do MdBs think about social media in detail? In most instances, they perceive their target groups to be less influenced by Twitter than by Facebook. However, it is noteworthy that the MdBs attributed to Twitter a comparatively strong political influence on journalists in 2015 and 2016. Moreover, they believed that many journalists and other politicians used the microblogging service. Thus, in the eyes of the MdBs, Twitter is increasingly becoming a channel for social 'elites'. In contrast, they believed that all their target groups quite frequently used Facebook to obtain political information. Therefore, it is not surprising that they evaluated Facebook as being more suitable than Twitter for broadcasting information about their own political work. Twitter, on the other hand, is evaluated by the politicians as increasingly suitable to obtain political information.

To what extent can the intensity of the MdBs' social media use be explained by these perceptions? Regression analyses with 2015 data suggest a multi-faceted answer. While the perceived political influence of Facebook and Twitter on the general public and journalists, as well as on other politicians, had no impact on how intensively the MdBs used these channels for political purposes, the perceived influence of both channels on their own voters had a significant effect: The stronger the MdBs believed the political influence of Facebook and/or Twitter on their voters to be, the more intensively they used these channels to spread information about their own political work (only in the case of Facebook) and everyday lives. This indicates that although many members might have taken their Facebook or Twitter profiles for granted regardless of the benefits they were expected to produce (e.g., Marcinkowski and Metag 2014), members of the 18th Bundestag acted purposefully by using social media when they expected a positive impact on the most important target group: their own voters. Since the MdBs did not make these strategic considerations in 2012 and 2013 (Author, Author and non-Author 2016), they may have learned to use social media more strategically in subsequent years. The fact that

perceived influence on the general public did not affect their online activities indicates that MdBs are primarily concerned with reaching and retaining their own electorate rather than attracting new voters. Moreover, as the perceived reach of Facebook and Twitter had no impact on the MdBs' social media activities, they apparently did not care to reach as many people as possible with these channels. Rather, it seemed important for them to influence at least parts of specific groups of people, especially their voters.

The strongest effect on the MdBs' online activities was the perceived suitability to broadcast political information via Facebook and Twitter: When these channels were considered unsuitable, they were hardly used, if ever, for these purposes. This is another indication that social media are used purposefully by members of the Bundestag.

Taken together, perceptions do partly explain the social media activities of MdBs. The explanatory power is small, but consistent. Certainly, other factors, such as the age of the parliamentarian, the party affiliation, or aspects which were not considered in the studies at hand (e.g., election campaign specific factors like the competitiveness of an election campaign) are also relevant – or rather significantly more important. However, future surveys aiming to explain the media usage of politicians should also consider the politicians' perceptions.

The present study has some limitations. For instance, all data were based on self-reports by the MdBs; however, it is unclear to what extent politicians can, for example, correctly assess the nature and intensity of their online activities. For this reason, in future research, it would be useful to link self-reports concerning perceptions with data from content analyses which provide reliable and objective information on how intensively social media profiles are used by parliamentarians and for which purposes. Another limitation was that not all items were queried in all surveys. In addition, the constructs were partly measured in slightly different ways, which

might have distorted the comparisons over the years. Furthermore, an item to measure reciprocal communication between politicians and citizens via Facebook and Twitter was lacking.

Despite these limitations, the data provide a valid overview of how a central group of German politics, members of the German Bundestag, use and perceive social media channels, as well as how usage and perceptions are related. These aspects were measured four times, and changes were traced over a period of five years. Moreover, the present study enriches the literature on politicians' motivations for online activity by revealing the extent to which social media activities are influenced by subjective perceptions in different ways.

TABLE 1

SAMPLES COMPARED WITH THE ENTIRE BUNDESTAG

	Sample 2012	Sample 2013	Entire Bundestag 2013	Sample 2015	Sample 2016	Entire Bundestag 2016
Sex						
Female	27.8	29.5	32.9	38.7	38.8	36.8
Male	72.2	70.5	67.1	61.3	61.2	63.2
Year of birth						
1950 or earlier	25.8	23.8	21.3	6.1	5.5	9.0
1951 to 1960	29.0	33.8	34.0	33.5	38.2	33.0
1961 to 1970	29.0	25.4	27.6	33.5	37.3	33.7
1971 to 1980	14.8	15.4	15.2	19.4	13.6	18.9
1981 or later	1.3	1.5	1.9	5.8	5.5	5.4
Party affiliation						
CDU/CSU	38.6	29.2	38.2	39.3	36.3	49.2
SPD	23.9	30.6	23.6	32.1	38.1	30.6
FDP	17.4	18.1	15.0			
Left Party	13.0	15.3	12.3	19.0	16.8	10.2
Alliance 90/The Greens	7.1	6.9	11.0	9.5	8.8	10.0

Notes: Numbers are percentages; $n_{Sample\ 2012}$ = 194; $n_{Sample\ 2013}$ = 149; $n_{Sample\ 2015}$ = 170; $n_{Sample\ 2016}$ = 118; $n_{Entire\ Bundestag\ 2013}$ = 620; $n_{Entire\ Bundestag\ 2016}$ = 630.

TABLE 2

BUNDESTAG MEMBERS' SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE

	2012		2013		2015		2016	
Facebook usage ...								
… to get political information	3.23	(1.59)	3.50	(1.57)	3.01	(1.29)	3.16	(1.29)
… to broadcast information about own political work	3.20	(1.46)	3.60	(1.30)	3.98	(1.25)	3.98	(1.27)
… to broadcast information about own everyday life					2.49	(1.44)	2.35	(1.24)
Twitter usage ...								
… to get political information	2.26	(1.60)	2.33	(1.60)	2.26	(1.47)	2.39	(1.46)
… to broadcast information about own political work	2.25	(1.57)	2.42	(1.54)	2.44	(1.63)	2.32	(1.53)
… to broadcast information about own everyday life					1.57	(1.06)	1.58	(1.02)

Notes: Mean estimates and standard deviations (in parentheses); all items were measured on a five-level scale (2012 and 2013: to get political information: 1 = *never* to 5 = *daily*; 2012 and 2013: to broadcast information about own political work: 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *very intensive*; 2015 and 2016: all items: 1 = *never* to 5 = *very frequently*); $n_{2012} = 187–193$; $n_{2013} = 146–149$; $n_{2015} = 168–170$; $n_{2016} = 118$.

TABLE 3

BUNDESTAG MEMBERS' PERCEPTIONS ABOUT THE POLITICAL INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

	2012		2013		2015		2016	
Perceived political influence of Facebook on …								
… the general public	2.97	(.97)	2.95	(.85)	2.64	(.77)	2.72	(.86)
… journalists	3.09	(.94)	3.29	(.91)	2.91	(1.06)	2.86	(1.05)
… politicians	2.90	(.92)	3.05	(.87)	2.78	(.96)	2.76	(.99)
… own voters					3.10	(.86)	3.13	(.91)
Perceived political influence of Twitter on …								
… the general public	2.29	(.75)	2.35	(.85)	2.02	(.74)	2.25	(.92)
… journalists	2.96	(.97)	3.26	(1.05)	3.12	(1.12)	3.22	(1.21)
… politicians	2.66	(.82)	2.99	(.96)	2.74	(1.09)	2.86	(1.07)
… own voters					2.20	(.89)	2.46	(1.03)

Notes: Mean estimates and standard deviations (in parentheses); all items were measured on a five-level scale (1 = *no influence* to 5 = *very strong influence*); n_{2012} = 186–192; n_{2013} = 144–147; n_{2015} = 160–169; n_{2016} = 93–117.

TABLE 4

BUNDESTAG MEMBERS' PERCEPTIONS ABOUT THE REACH OF SOCIAL MEDIA TO GET POLITICAL INFORMATION

	2012		2013		2015		2016	
Perceived reach of Facebook to get political information among ...								
… the general public	2.83	(.94)	2.93	(.99)	2.99	(.76)	3.18	(.76)
… journalists					3.65	(1.12)	3.94	(.97)
… politicians					3.78	(.97)	3.79	(1.02)
… own voters					3.08	(.77)	3.15	(.87)
Perceived reach of Twitter to get political information among…								
… the general public	2.11	(.84)	2.47	(.95)	2.27	(.70)	2.33	(.78)
… journalists					3.74	(1.14)	4.04	(1.04)
… politicians					3.12	(.97)	3.29	(1.02)
… own voters					2.07	(.86)	1.99	(.84)

Notes: Mean estimates and standard deviations (in parentheses); all items were measured on a five-level scale (2012 and 2013: 1 = *very few people* to 5 = *very many people*; 2015 and 2016: 1 = *almost no one* to 5 = *almost all*); n_{2012} = 191–193; n_{2013} = 147-148; n_{2015} = 168–170; n_{2016} = 116–118.

TABLE 5

BUNDESTAG MEMBERS' PERCEPTIONS ABOUT THE SUITABILITY OF SOCIAL

MEDIA

	2012		2013		2015		2016	
Perceived suitability of Facebook ...								
… to get political information	2.85	(1.04)	2.86	(1.05)	2.94	(1.00)	3.00	(.97)
… to broadcast information about own political work					3.72	(1.14)	3.83	(.99)
Perceived suitability of Twitter								
… to get political information	2.23	(1.05)	2.52	(1.12)	2.80	(1.24)	3.04	(1.24)
… to broadcast information about own political work					2.98	(1.20)	3.10	(1.17)

Notes: Mean estimates and standard deviations (in parentheses); all items were measured on a five-level scale (1 = *not suitable at all* to 5 = *very suitable*); n_{2012} = 189-190; n_{2013} = 147-148; n_{2015} = 165–170; n_{2016} = 112–118.

TABLE 6

INFLUENCE OF BUNDESTAG MEMBERS' PERCEPTIONS ON THEIR SOCIAL MEDIA
USAGE

	Broadcast information about own political work via		Broadcast information about own everyday life via	
	Facebook (n = 148)	Twitter (n = 138)	Facebook (n = 147)	Twitter (n = 140)
Sex (1 = female)	.07	-.01	.01	.03
Age	-.24**	-.07	-.18*	-.20*
Education years	.08	-.08	-.17*	-.03
Party affiliation (Reference: CDU/CSU)				
SPD	.18*	-.01	.05	-.04
Alliance '90/The Greens	.09	.20*	-.17#	.02
Left Party	.07	-.00	.03	-.07
R^2	.18***	.16**	.10*	.09*
Perceived influence				
General public	-.11	-.05	-.07	-.11
Journalists	.03	.04	-.06	-.13
Politicians	-.01	.01	.01	.28#
Own voters	.20*	-.01	.25*	.18#
Change R^2	.03	.00	.04	.05
Perceived reach				
General public	.04	.11	-.09	-.03
Journalists	.10	.09	.15	.08
Politicians	-.09	-.05	-.04	.09
Own voters	.01	-.05	.09	-.06
Change R^2	.01	.03	.02	.05
Perceived suitability				
Broadcast information about own political work	.32***	.49***		
Change R^2	.13***	.25***		
Total R^2	.35***	.43***	.17*	.19*

Notes: Standardised beta coefficients; #p < .10; *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001; data from 2015.

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