

## **Time for Climate Action? Political Actors' Uses of Twitter to Focus Public Attention on the Climate Crisis During the 2019 Danish General Election**

JULIE UL DAM

Copenhagen Business School, Denmark

TINA ASKANIUS<sup>1</sup>

Malmö University, Sweden

This article examines civil society uses of Twitter to promote the climate crisis as an issue in the 2019 national election campaign in Denmark. Theoretically, we draw on Cammaerts's notion of the mediation opportunity structure and Wright, Nyberg, De Cock, and Whiteman's notion of climate imaginaries. Methodologically, we draw on Bennett and Segerberg's approach to studying networked interactions on Twitter. Our findings show that neither the legacy press nor MP candidates used climate-related hashtags promoted by civil society actors. MP candidates did frequently use climate-related hashtags. Nonetheless, these were mainly center-left candidates who mostly called for climate action to be propelled by green growth and technological solutions, while civil society actors called for climate action to be propelled by solidarity and systemic change. We discuss how these articulations of the climate crisis have implications for climate imaginaries and, ultimately, possibilities to act.

*Keywords: climate crisis debate, mediation opportunity structure, Twitter*

This article examines uses of Twitter for influencing the debate on the climate crisis during the 2019 national election campaign in Denmark by the legacy press, MP candidates, and civil society actors. It aims to further our understanding of the interplay between election campaigning, (digital) media, and social movement communication. Important research has been done in relation to these three dimensions. However, the interrelations between the three have rarely been studied. As a hypermediated event, the election opens up opportunities for civil society to debate and circulate understandings of the climate crisis and political alternatives to alleviate its consequences (Askanius & Uldam, 2011; Nilsen, Strømsnes, & Schmidt, 2018). This raises questions of how networked conversations on the climate crisis between politicians, civil society, and news media formed online during the run-up to the 2019 general elections in

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Julie Uldam: ju.msc@cbs.dk

Tina Askanius: tina.askanius@mau.se

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Denmark. Examining the communication practices of all three actors provides a window into understanding “Twitter linking-practices” (Moe & Larsson, 2013) in an “increasingly complex media environment in which both traditional news media and (other) social media shape political coverage” (Blach-Ørsten, Kæmsgaard Eberholst, & Burkal, 2018, p. 335). Further, one important way of researching the hybridity and complexity of “communications systems of an individual country is to examine the media uses of candidates . . . as these reflect the understanding and relevance of the underlying media logics’ . . . and ‘networking logics’” (Gudmundsson, 2019, p. 46), which characterize contemporary hybrid media systems (Chadwick, 2013) more broadly. Our study shows that civil society actors such as Extinction Rebellion, Greenpeace, and WWF used the momentum provided by the national elections to push the climate crisis up the political agenda. Indeed, political candidates also used Twitter to promote their political messages on climate action. However, these were mainly from green, left-wing parties, and their uptake of citizen-generated hashtags was limited. These patterns created two separate rather than networked conversations on the climate crisis.

Theoretically, we draw on Cammaerts’s (2012) notion of the mediation opportunity structure and its three interrelated levels: (1) the media opportunity structure, (2) the networked opportunity structure, and (3) the discursive opportunity structure, as well as Wright, Nyberg, De Cock, and Whiteman’s (2013) notion of climate imaginaries. Methodologically, we draw on Bennett and Segerberg’s (2012) approach to studying interactions among different networks. At the level of the media opportunity structure, we first examine the extent to which the legacy press takes up the efforts of civil society actors by mentioning their hashtags, such as #gørvalgetgrønt (#maketheelectiongreen) and #folketsklimamarch (#theepeoplesclimatemarch). Second, at the level of networked opportunity structure, we examine the ways in which civil society actors and MP candidates use the national elections to connect with each other, and the extent to which civil society actors are mentioned or retweeted by election candidates. Finally, at the level of discursive opportunity structure, we examine the ways in which the climate crisis is articulated discursively by all three actors. On the basis of this, we discuss the implications of such articulations and, ultimately, possibilities to act.

### **The Climate Crisis and/in the Media**

Scholarship on media and the politics of the climate crisis has focused mainly on the role of news media in shaping public opinion—the media logic and framing practices through which the public comes to understand climate crisis science and policy (Holmes, 2009; Zehr, 2009). Over the course of the past decade, however, social media platforms have disturbed media power relations, reducing the influence of legacy media and allowing nonelite actors, such as environmentalist groups and activists, to play a bigger role in shaping public debate and opinion on the climate crisis. Therefore, a burgeoning area of research addresses how social media work as key sites in the formation of climate crisis publics.

Twitter dominates empirical studies of digital political communication on the climate crisis. Part of the explanation for this bias toward Twitter is that, contrary to many other platforms, its API is relatively open. This means that researchers have access to data on mentions, hashtags, retweets, and the geographic location of tweets or users; this allows researchers to capture snapshots of interaction and public opinion empirically. At the same time, data harvested from Twitter lend themselves to both small-scale and big data studies. A recurring approach adopted to study public debate on the climate crisis on Twitter is examining

top users for a particular subissue—also referred to as opinion leaders, (micro-)celebrities, evangelists, or influencers—to understand the reach, spread, resonance, and life span of the conversations they generate (Pearce, Niederer, Özkula, & Sánchez Querubín, 2019). Several studies follow such top users after important events, including the official UN climate change summits, the Conference of the Parties, or the publication of reports by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (Holmberg & Hellsten, 2016; Walter, De Silva-Schmidt, & Bruggemann, 2017). Others have focused on bottom-up uses of Twitter as a tool for coalitions of civil society actors in organizing protests and direct action around major climate crisis protest events. The seminal work by Segerberg and Bennett (2011) on Twitter’s networking and agenda-setting properties in protest events is an important source of inspiration and starting point for this study.

Despite the extensive body of literature on climate crisis communication on Twitter, we know little of how networked conversations form on Twitter in relation to other political/media events such as national elections—beyond Conference of the Parties conferences and Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change releases—which may work as opportunity structures. This gap is addressed in this study. We tap into ongoing conversations about the affordances offered by online media to social movement actors, but instead of looking at NGOs and their Twitter use in isolation, we examine how they connect with parliamentary political actors and legacy media via digitally facilitated conversations created through hashtags. We approach civil society actors as an overarching term for independent, nonprofit organizations and private individuals, including interest organizations, scientists, activist groups, individual activists, citizens, NGOs, and NGO general secretaries and employees.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The analysis builds on a synthesis of three analytical approaches. Specifically, we draw on the three-step approach in Cammaerts’s (2012) framework, the mediation opportunity structure, Wright and colleagues’ (2013) notion of climate imaginaries, and Bennett and Segerberg’s (2012) approach to studying climate crisis conversations on Twitter.

#### ***Mediation Opportunity Structures and Connective Action***

Building on the concept of political opportunity structures, Cammaerts (2012) suggests the mediated opportunity structure to capture the dynamics of media, communication, protest, and activism at three interrelated levels: the media opportunity structure; the discursive opportunity structure; and the networked opportunity structure. Cammaerts’s (2012) framework is grounded in Tarrow’s (1994) conceptualization of the political opportunity structure defined as “dimensions of the political environment that provide incentives for people to undertake collective action by affecting their expectations for success or failure” (p. 85). The purpose of the concept is to capture structural conditions that influence social movements’ access to the political process.

The three levels of the mediation opportunity structure relate these opportunities and constraints to media and communication. First, the media opportunity structure refers to the role of mass media in providing visibility to social movements’ agendas. In this way, the concept captures opportunities for gaining media access through mass media management (McCurdy, 2010) or online platforms. Cammaerts (2012)

refers to Gamson and Wolfsfeld's (1993) argument that legacy media coverage serves three major purposes for social movements: mobilization, validation, and scope enlargement. While their analysis is concerned with the interplay between movements and legacy media, it can be extended to social movements' uses of online media as platforms for reaching broader publics via legacy media attention that online material can generate. The Internet's properties as a "pull-medium" is argued to merely connect like-minded users (Cammaerts, 2007). Therefore, legacy media are still key to social movements' success. This points to an interplay between the level of the media opportunity structure and that of the networked opportunity structure in a hybrid media system, which conditions the latter (Chadwick, 2013; Wong & Wright, 2020). We return to this interplay later.

Second, the level of the discursive opportunity structure refers to the discursive struggles that social movements spur by contesting societal structures and the beliefs that underpin them. In Cammaerts's (2012) framework, this level is not defined in discourse theoretical terms, but more broadly and eclectically in terms of narratives and framing. It deals with the production of (counter)narratives outside legacy media for ideological positioning, mobilization, and willingness to act. Although this broad and eclectic conceptualization has merits, we adopt a narrower discourse approach. Therefore, to operationalize this level analytically, we draw on the discourse theoretical concepts of articulation and signifiers (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). Signifiers such as green can be empty of meaning and thus open to be assigned new meaning in the process of articulation. We further connect this to the concept of social imaginaries, and specifically climate imaginaries. For example, the discursive articulation of the climate crisis as a product of capitalism questions the assumption that solutions to the climate crisis must entail economic growth.

Third, the networked opportunity structure refers to opportunities for organizing and mobilizing, and captures resistance practices facilitated by digital media, including mobilization, organization, and dissemination outside legacy media. Wong and Wright (2020) address the interplay between the levels of the media opportunity structure and the networked opportunity structure. They draw on Chadwick's (2013) notion of hybrid media systems, understood as the ways in which digital media facilitate novel processes of "simultaneous integration and fragmentation" (Chadwick, 2013). Here, the legacy press, including newspapers and television, intercedes with formats, genres, norms, and actors introduced by digital media (see also Mattoni & Ceccobelli, 2018). This enables actors traditionally outside legacy media to access these professional news circles (Chadwick, 2013). Wong and Wright (2020) further connect this to Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) notion of connective action, with its attention to networks that cross organizational and potentially political boundaries. Following this, we pay attention to both the hybrid media system in which the empirical focus of this study is located, and logics of connective action at the level of the networked opportunity structure.

Importantly, the three levels of the mediation opportunity structure are interrelated. Across the three levels, Cammaerts (2012) discerns three protest logics on the basis of della Porta and Diani (2006). First, a *logic of numbers* drives attempts to gain legacy media attention by staging mass demonstrations or online petitions. Second, a *logic of damage* drives disruptive actions by inflicting damage on property, such as corporate property or websites. Third, a *logic of bearing witness* drives creative and symbolic actions of civil disobedience. These protest logics reflect media logics as "the imperatives that shape the particular attributes and ways of doing things within given media . . . the procedures of selection, form, tempo, informational

density, aesthetics, contents, modes of address, and production schedules" (Dahlgren, 2009, p. 52). At the same time, the context of Twitter may introduce what has been termed social media logics (Enli & Simonsen, 2018; Haim et al., 2021; Klinger & Svensson, 2018; van Dijck & Poell, 2013). To better capture the protest logics at play at the three levels of the mediation opportunity structure during an election campaign, we need to consider their connection to both media logics more generally and social media logics. This comes back to Chadwick's (2013) notion of hybrid media. From this perspective, Harder, Paulussen, and Van Aelst (2016) have found that established actors still played a key role in gaining visibility for posts on Twitter during an election campaign in Belgium, pointing to media logics also playing a central role in the Belgian media ecology. Enli and Simonsen (2018) have also pointed to a central role for media logics in a Norwegian election campaign, albeit alongside social media logics. Wong and Wright (2020) have identified an interplay between "mainstream" and "social" media logics in a protest movement in Hong Kong. Therefore, our analysis of protest logics considers the ways in which they reflect media logics and social media logics.

### ***Discursive Opportunities and Climate Imaginaries***

This study's focus on the climate crisis calls for attention to how people think and feel about the crisis. This has implications for expectations and, ultimately, climate action and governance. The notion of social imaginaries has been used to describe people's understandings of, feelings about, and expectations for society, and their implications for how we organize (Taylor, 2004). In other words, social imaginaries shape our sense of what are acceptable, desirable, and possible responses to the climate crisis (Wright et al., 2013). Wright and colleagues (2013) argue for the importance of understanding the climate crisis in relation to social and political assumptions and that it is "our current capitalist imaginary," and its striving for economic growth, that sustains fossil fuel extraction, the use of pesticides, and technological solutions such as carbon trading. In this view, the ability to imagine alternatives to a capitalist organization of society is key to moving beyond the often inadequate technological solutions to the climate crisis (Wright et al., 2013). Levy and Spicer (2013) identify four climate imaginaries: "fossil fuels forever," "climate apocalypse," "technomarket," and "sustainable lifestyle" (p. 660). The fossil fuel forever imaginary builds on economic growth, which enables it to resonate with the everyday lives of wider publics (Levy & Spicer, 2013). However, while more recent imaginaries, such as technomarket and sustainable lifestyle, offer opportunities to challenge the dominant fossil fuel imaginary, they resonate with smaller publics (Levy & Spicer, 2013). The concept of social imaginaries, and climate imaginaries specifically, ties in with the discourse theoretical approach outlined earlier. For example, the technomarket climate imaginary can be conjured up by assigning particular meaning to the signifier green in connection to economic growth. This highlights the importance of promoting particular climate imaginaries, as different actors compete to leverage the possibilities of the discursive opportunity structure.

We explore these issues through the following research questions, addressing each of the three levels of the mediation opportunity structure:

*RQ1: How and to what extent do legacy media actors create visibility for civil society actors by mentioning their climate hashtags?*

*RQ2: How and to what extent do civil society and parliamentary actors use the national elections to connect in a networked conversation with each other on issues around the climate crisis?*

*RQ3: How is the climate crisis articulated as a political issue on Twitter by all three actors?*

In the following section, we outline the methods used to address the three research questions.

### **Methodological Approach**

The vast majority of empirical research on Twitter's role in political debate around the climate crisis draws on big data approaches, which attempt to identify macro-level trends (Pearce et al., 2019). Such studies risk backgrounding the important context to social media posts (Pearce, Brown, Nerlich, & Koteyko, 2015). Therefore, our analysis of tweets combines qualitative and quantitative methods for examining how civil society actors, politicians, and media connected by tapping into each other's conversations on the climate crisis through the use of hashtags.

Our data consist of tweets collected from the announcement of the election on May 7, 2019, to the day of the election, June 5, 2019 ( $n = 6,850$ ). The tweets were collected using the Digital Media Lab's<sup>2</sup> harvesting tool DMI-TCAT, which allowed us to track Twitter content by selecting keywords, hashtags, or geo-location. Two different data sets were collected. The first comprises all tweets ( $n = 5,215$ ) containing one or several of the preselected hashtags (#dkgreen, #dkklima [#dkclimate], #grøntvalg [#greenelection], #climatestrike, #fridaysforfuture, #schoolsstrike4climate, #klimastrejke [#climatestrike], #oprørforlivet [#rebellionforlife], #gørvalgetgrønt [#maketheelectiongreen]). These hashtags were selected to include general climate-related hashtags (e.g., #dkklima/dkclimate), election-related hashtags (e.g., #grøntvalg/greenelection), protest-related hashtags (e.g., #klimastrejke/climatestrike), and citizen-generated hashtags beyond protest (e.g., #gørvalgetgrønt/maketheelectiongreen). In this data set, the tweets were posted by 1,929 different users. Almost all of these (99%) contained hashtags. The ratio of tweets and retweets among civil society users was 1.7. The second data set includes all tweets ( $n = 1,592$ ) posted by MP candidates in that same time period, containing one or several of the preselected hashtags. In this data set, the tweets were posted by 163 MP candidates.<sup>3</sup> Around half of these (53%) contained hashtags. The ratio of tweets and retweets among candidates was 1.6. Jungherr (2016) argues that the political discussion in the Danish Twittersphere is, to a large extent, hashtag-based. Therefore, a hashtag-based sample (as opposed to keyword sampling) provides a pertinent data set of tweets pertaining to politics in general (in this case, around hashtags such as #dkpol and #dkgreen), and this particular election and the more specific political issue investigated—in this case, the climate crisis.

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<sup>2</sup> The Digital Media Lab (DeMiLab) is hosted by Roskilde University. For more information, see [digitalmedialab.ruc.dk](http://digitalmedialab.ruc.dk)

<sup>3</sup> The TCAT was set to collect tweets from all MP candidates who ran for the 2019 election and had a Twitter account.

In our analysis of the two data sets, we were interested in (1) the extent to which Danish news media used civil society-driven hashtags in their reporting on the climate and the elections (the level of the media opportunity structure, RQ1) and (2) the extent to which political candidates used the civil society-generated hashtags as part of their campaign efforts on Twitter (the level of the networked opportunity structure, RQ2). For the first point, we manually went through all tweets, identifying news media accounts. For the second point, we searched for all preselected hashtags in candidate tweets. In the second data set, we were interested in a qualitative understanding of political candidates' use of Twitter more generally, including their strategic inclusion of hashtags to create debates around the climate crisis during the election campaign. For the level of the discursive opportunity structure (RQ3), the analysis employs a thematic content analysis to draw out the recurring discursive patterns in our data set of 949 tweets and enable rich descriptions thereof. Drawing on the approach to thematic content analysis proposed by Chouliaraki and Zaborowski (2017), our analytical categories were first developed from the study's conceptual concern with climate imaginaries (Levy & Spicer, 2013). We first manually identified articulations of climate imaginaries in both data sets. On the basis of this, the tweets were categorized in relation to the climate imaginaries identified by Levy and Spicer (2013): the climate apocalypse, the technomarket, and sustainable lifestyle. The fossil fuels forever imaginary was absent in our data set. We then identified variants and subthemes within the overall categories: hopeful articulations underpinned by the climate apocalypse imaginary, and articulations of hypocrisy and individual responsibility underpinned by the sustainable lifestyle imaginary. Finally, we selected tweets that exemplify the most dominant patterns and articulations. These were further analyzed with a focus on how networked conversations construed the climate crisis as a political, economic, and social issue, calling for different actions and solutions.

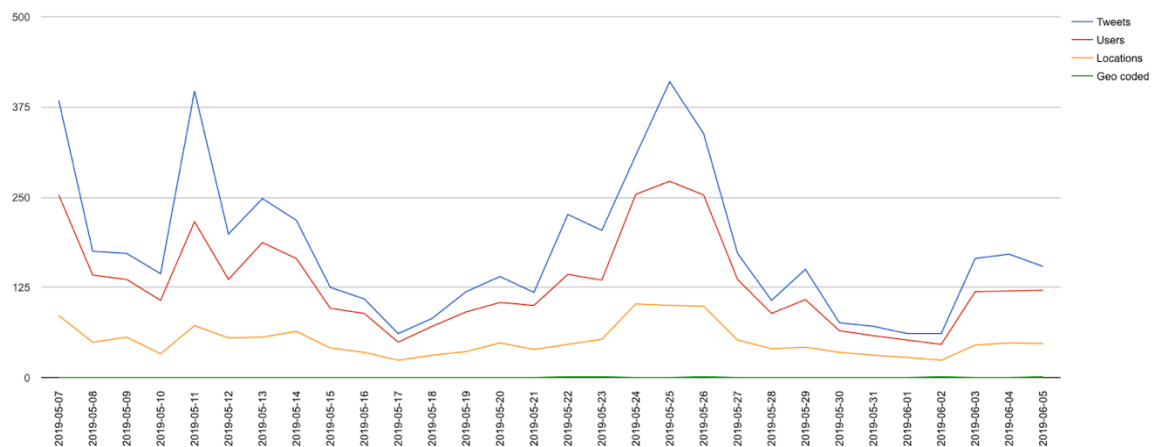
Twitter is both a networking agent and a window on a certain public debate and space of connective action (Segerberg & Bennett, 2011). In both respects, it is only one agent in a complex hybrid media system and only one of several windows into understanding how the climate crisis was debated during the 2019 elections. Nonetheless, it does provide an important entry point to understanding how networked conversations unfold among actors that operate within a broader media ecology. Twitter still has a marginal position in Denmark's hybrid media system, in which legacy media still dominate citizens' uses of sources for climate crisis news (Newman, Fletcher, Schulz, Andi, & Kleis Nielsen, 2020). In fact, only 12% of the population is active on Twitter (Blach-Ørsten, Kæmsgaard Eberholst, Hartley, & Tuomainen Steensberg, 2020). In this sense, the Danish Twittersphere mirrors international patterns; in general, "users are not representative of countries' general population but, rather, make up an elite consisting of politicians, journalists, and the politically interested" (Blach-Ørsten et al., 2017, p. 334). It is, however, an increasingly pervasive tool in election campaigns, and the interactions in this particular space should not be overlooked.

### **Analysis: National Elections and Climate Debates on Twitter**

Before proceeding to the three-part analysis of the use of Twitter during the election campaign, we map the hashtags used most frequently during the election period and a thematization of the different spheres in which they originated.

### **Mapping Climate-Oriented Hashtags Used in the 2019 Election**

The 2019 general election in Denmark was to become the first election in the country in which the climate crisis was at the top of the print media agenda (see Blach-Ørsten et al., 2020). This was the case not least on Twitter, where climate-related tweets peaked on three occasions (see Figure 1): first, on the day the election was announced (May 7, 2019), with approximately 400; on the day the political party Alternativet (the Alternative) unveiled its campaign poster carved in ice (May 11, 2019); and, finally, on the day of the climate march, titled "Make the Election a Climate Election" (May 25, 2019).



**Figure 1. Peaks in climate-related tweets.**

Overall, the hashtags in our sample can be divided into a cluster of bottom-up-generated hashtags created by grassroots organizations and initiatives, and a cluster of top-down-generated conversations created by political parties and candidates. The latter includes hashtags such as #stemgrønne, used by the Alternative, as well as #klimavalg, #grøntkryds, #klimakryds, and #klimaX, used widely by members of the political parties the Red-Green Alliance and the Alternative, but also by voters seeking to express political sympathies and support for these parties.

Among the bottom-up hashtags used most frequently by civil society actors were #dkklima and #dknatur. Event-specific hashtags included #klimamarch, #folketsklimamarch, and #klimamarchkbh, launched by a broad civil society coalition of 37 Danish organizations. Among these were 350klimabevægelsenDK (a coalition of climate NGOs and networks in Denmark) and Greenpeace Denmark, in the prelude to the climate march *Folkets Klimamarch* (the People's Climate March), which took place on May 26, 2019; this was the day before the EU elections and a week before the national elections. The two hashtags #klimastrejke and #fridaysforfuture were associated with the school strikes and the global protest movement Fridays for Future, initiated by climate activist Greta Thunberg. The hashtag #maketheelectiongreen (#gørvalgetgrønt) was initiated by the citizen coalition *This is it—make the election green (Så er det nu—gør valget grønt)*, which sought to mobilize voters concerned about the climate crisis.



Examples of hybrid hashtags falling between the two categories include #Grøntvalg, which was first created by a Norwegian politician (Hilde Opoku) and picked up later, in 2011, in a Danish context by the organization Vegetarian Association. During the 2019 elections, the hashtag was used by a wide range of actors, including political candidates and civil society actors. International hashtags were also used during the election, often in combination with the general hashtag for the election, #fv19/#FV19. These include hashtags such as #GreenNewDeal and #iloveglobalgoals, which were mainly adopted by candidates running for the European Parliament.

Overall, civil society actors were largely reformist in their orientation on Twitter. Alarmist hashtags used by more radical actors such as Extinction Rebellion, including #ClimateBreakdown and #EcologicalCollapse, were not used by other actors during the elections. Reformist civil society actors such as Climate March Copenhagen, Forests of the World, WWF, and the Green Student Movement were more active on Twitter, but did not use the civil society-generated hashtags with significant frequency. The NGOs and civil society actors that most frequently used the hashtags during the elections were klima350dk (91); Greenpeace (17); Danmarks Naturfredningsforening (The Danish Society for Nature Conservation; 22); and Borgerinitiativet—Så er det nu (the Citizen Initiative—This is it, using the hashtag #Maketheelectiongreen [#Gørvalgetgrønt]; 16).

#### *The Election as a Mediation Opportunity Structure*

For climate activists and NGOs, the potential of the election as a mediation opportunity structure was connected to possibilities for influencing public debate and, ultimately, making the climate crisis central to candidates' campaigns. In the following analysis, we examine the extent to which they succeeded in doing so, how the networked conversations played out, and how the climate crisis was constructed as a political issue in these debates on this specific platform.

#### *Media Opportunity Structure*

In promoting hashtags such as #gørvalgetgrønt (#maketheelectiongreen) and #klimastrejke (#climatestrike) during the election campaign, civil society actors mainly drew on a logic of numbers to gain visibility for climate issues in legacy media. While the proliferation and popularization of social media have changed the dynamics of civic engagement and agenda-setting in many ways, legacy media continue to play a key role in setting the agenda (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018). Using hashtags such as #gørvalgetgrønt and #klimamarch, civil society actors tried to attract the attention of legacy media by drawing on a logic of numbers. For example, the citizen initiative behind the hashtag #gørvalgetgrønt wrote in its presentation of its initiative on Twitter, "We want to gather 100,000 citizens for a more ambitious environment and climate policy" (Så er det nu, 2019; our translation). The use of hashtags such as #klimamarch drew on a logic of numbers, because a march typically involves large numbers of demonstrators (Harrebye, 2011; Uldam, 2013). In this way, the logic of numbers worked to demonstrate wide public support for prioritizing the climate agenda. As such, the logic of numbers reflects the principles of representative democracy (della Porta & Diani, 2006), and media logics more generally (Dahlgren, 2009). However, the most frequently used hashtags among civil society actors were #dkgreen and #dkpol (short for #dkpolitics). Overall, civil society actors, including private individuals, scientists, interest organizations, NGOs, and NGO general

secretaries and employees, used #dkgreen and #dkpol 3,275 and 2,953 times, respectively (63% and 57%, see also the distribution in Figure 4 below). Both #dkgreen and #dkpol can be seen as “well-established, long-term hashtags” (Bruns, Moon, Paul, & Münch, 2016, p. 32) that were used long before, and independent of, the election. A similar tendency can be traced—albeit on a much smaller scale—among organized civil society actors (in this case, NGOs such as Greenpeace and networks such as Extinction Rebellion).<sup>4</sup> Here, #dkgreen and #dkpol were mentioned 154 and 128 times, respectively (87% and 72%), again suggesting the prevalence of media logics alongside social media logics; this has also been found to characterize Norwegian and Belgian elections (Enli & Simonsen, 2018; Harder et al., 2016).

While the extent of media effects is highly contextual, a tendency remains for the themes covered by legacy media to influence voters. During the Danish election campaign, the Danish press only mentioned the climate to a very limited extent in its coverage of the elections on Twitter. None of the main broadcasting channels connected to climate issues in their tweets, and only three broadsheets mentioned the climate: *Information*, *Politiken*, and *Berlingske*. Of these, only three tweets (one from *Information* and two from *Politiken*) include a hashtag promoted by—or referencing—civil society organizations. The absence of the topic of climate in the Danish media’s reporting on Twitter is in stark contrast to Blach-Ørsten and colleagues’ (2020) findings; they showed that the Danish press, in its print reporting, followed the civil society agenda and gave priority to topics related to climate. Hence, Twitter did not provide a window into how legacy media in general gave visibility to civil society’s agendas during the election. However, differences in the visibility granted to the climate among legacy print media are reflected in their tweets. Blach-Ørsten and colleagues (2020) showed that newspapers associated with the left side of the political spectrum (*Politiken* and *Information*) gave higher priority to climate than other newspapers. Our data show a similar tendency, with *Information* mentioning the climate 14 times and *Politiken* six times, while *Berlingske*, associated with the right side of the political spectrum, mentioned the issue only once.

#### *Networked Opportunity Structure*

While legacy media provided little visibility to the climate on Twitter, the political candidates mentioned it frequently. Overall, it was one of the most frequently mentioned issues. The climate was mentioned 5,215 times in total, and in 895 of 1,592 tweets by candidates, making it the most mentioned issue by candidates on Twitter during the election campaign. However, the distribution of mentions was far from even across the political spectrum, and candidates used the hashtags promoted by civil society actors only to a limited extent.

In relation to the distribution of mentions, only candidates and/or party profiles from the Alternative, the Red–Green Alliance, Klaus Riskær Pedersen, the Conservative Party, the Danish Social

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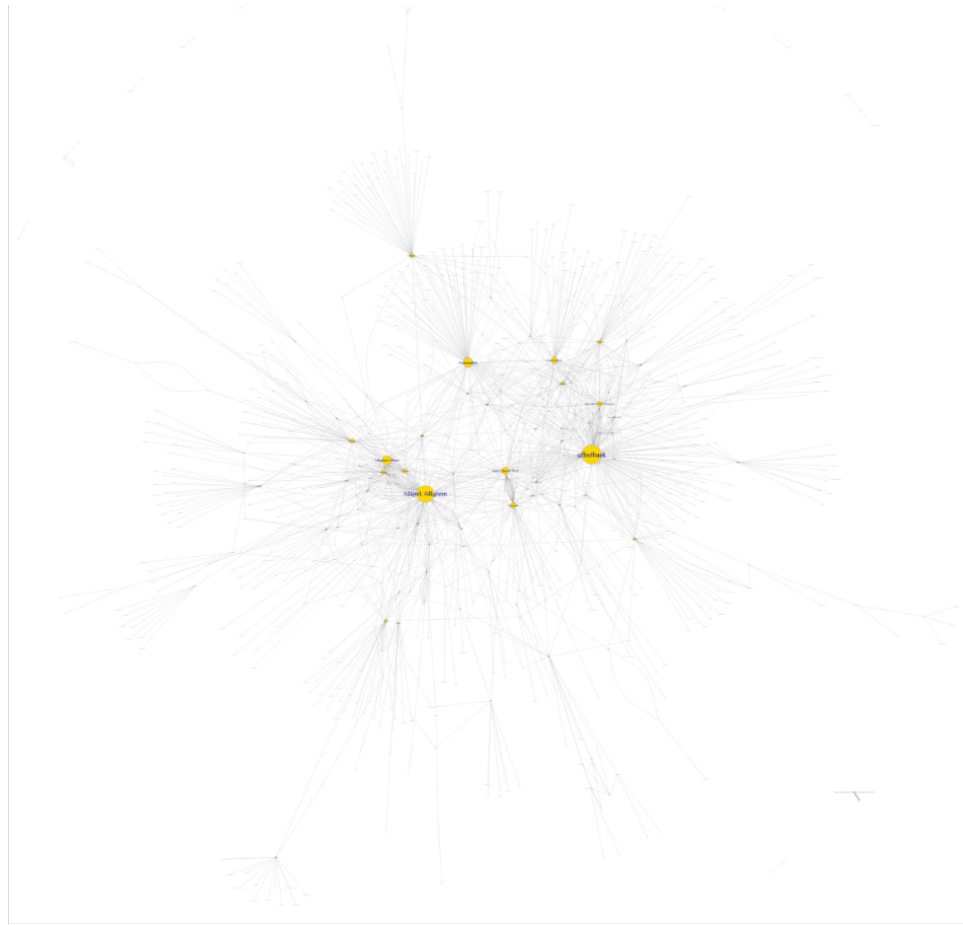
<sup>4</sup> All organized civil society actors in our data sets are ActionAid Denmark, CARE Denmark, Climate March Copenhagen, BirdLife Denmark, Extinction Rebellion Denmark, Extinction Rebellion Germany, Extinction Rebellion Ruhr district, DanChurchAid, Greenpeace Denmark, Danish Society for Nature Conservation, The Green Student Movement Denmark, Klima Aktion DK, 350 The Climate Movement in Denmark, NOAH Denmark, Omstilling Nu (Transition Now), Green Transition Denmark, Så er det nu (This is it), and WWF Denmark.

Liberal Party, the Social Democratic Party, and the Socialist People's Party mentioned the climate more than 15 times. The leaders of the major center parties (the Social Democratic Party and the Liberal Party) did not mention the climate on Twitter during the election campaign. This reflects the visibility granted by candidates to the climate in legacy print media; the Alternative and the Socialist People's Party mentioned the climate significantly more often than did other parties, and the leaders of the major center parties focused on the theme "refugees and immigrants" rather than the climate (Blach-Ørsten et al., 2020).

Most candidates consistently used well-established, long-term hashtags, especially #dkgreen and #dkpol, rather than the hashtags promoted by civil society actors. Overall, candidates used #dkgreen 1,384 times; in contrast, the hashtags promoted by civil society actors were used only 38 times (out of a total of 1,592 tweets): #gørvalgetgrønt (18), #klimastrejke (10), #folketsklimamarch (10), and #oprørforlivet (0). Again, this gestures toward a prevalence of media logics and a dominant position for journalists and politicians (Harder et al., 2016). Candidates' uses of hashtags promoted by civil society actors figured most frequently in relation to the climate march that took place May 25, 2019. This reflects the dominance of hashtags related to the climate march promoted by civil society, including #klimastrejke, #folketsklimamarch, and #fridaysforfuture.

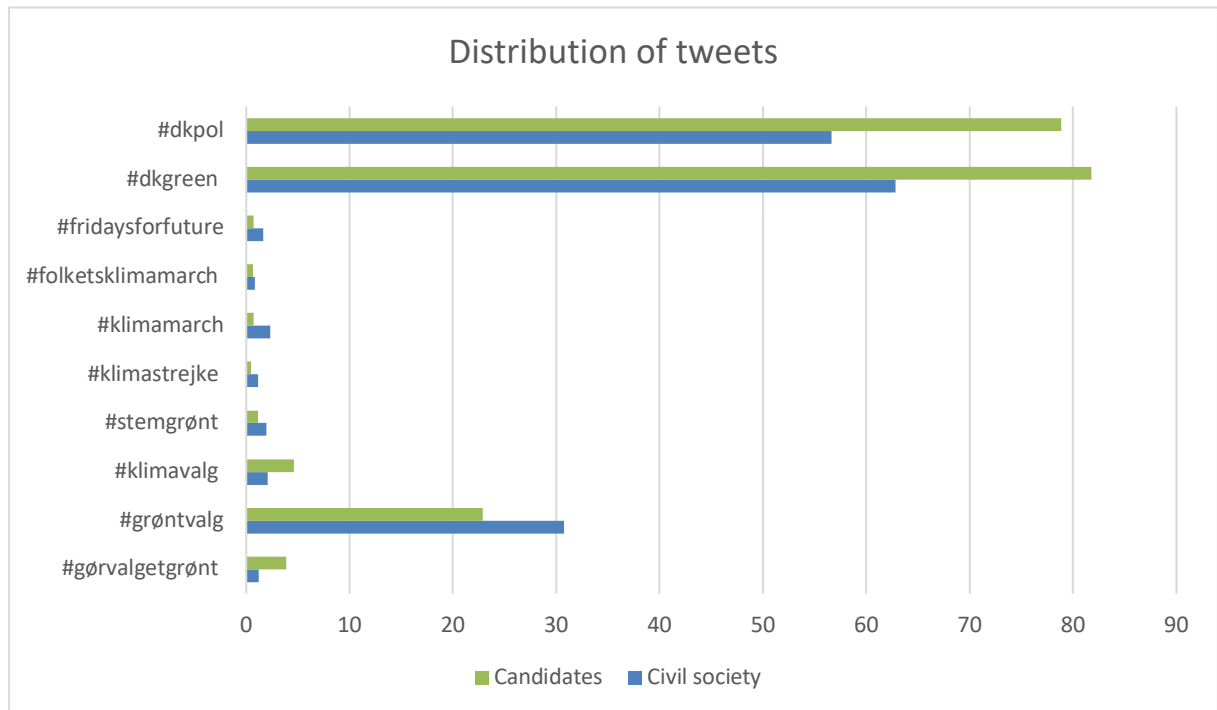
The candidates who most frequently used hashtags promoted by civil society actors were those standing as candidates for the Socialist People's Party and the Alternative. In total, they did so 15 and 14 times, respectively. In relation to the Alternative, this reflects the origins of the party's aims to include bottom-up organizing with participation from civil society actors (Husted, 2017). Also, among these candidates, the well-established, long-term hashtags #dkgreen and #dkpol figured most frequently. Overall, candidates used the climate hashtag #dkgreen more frequently than the politics hashtag #dkpol (see Figure 2). This reflects the prominent space that the legacy press gave the climate during the 2019 election and candidates' attempts to engage with this theme.

With 620 and 288 tweets with climate-related hashtags, the Socialist People's Party and the Alternative, respectively, used climate-related hashtags most frequently, both mainstream and those promoted by civil society. This is also illustrated in the network below (Figure 2), where #dkgreen and #dkpol figure most prominently along with candidates from the Alternative, the Socialist People's Party and the Danish Social Liberal Party (the latter represented by Ida Auken, now member of the Social Democratic Party).



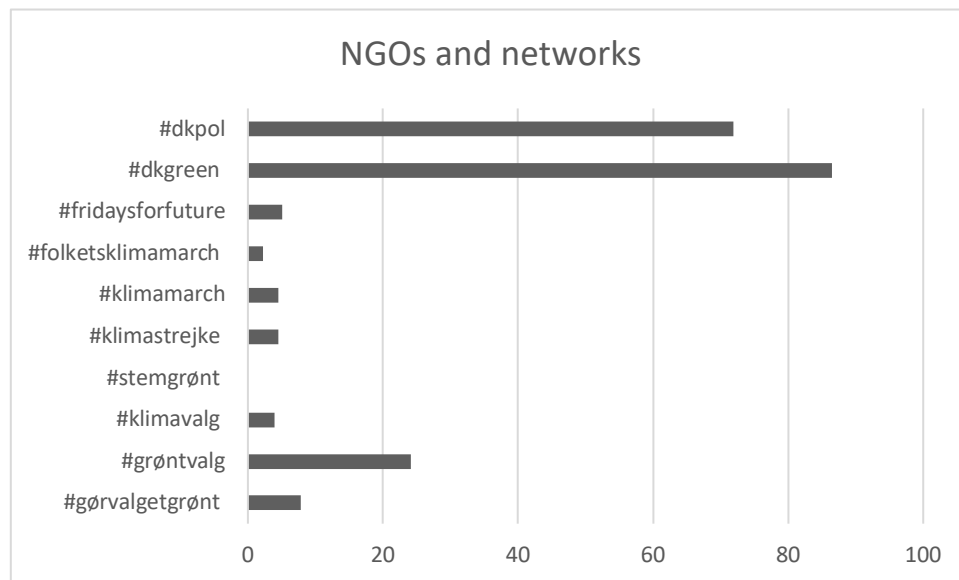
**Figure 2. Network of users and hashtags among MP candidates.**

However, while the number of tweets by candidates with hashtags promoted by civil society actors was extremely low, other hashtags that could be seen as responses to civil society hashtags were frequently used. For example, while the hashtag #gørvalgetgrønt (#maketheelectiongreen) was only mentioned 18 times by candidates, the hashtags #grøntvalg (#greenelection), #klimavalg (#climateelection), and #stemgrønt (#votegreen) were used 423 times. This can be seen as candidates responding to civil society calls for making the election green.



**Figure 3. Distribution of tweets percentage during the 2019 election.**

The candidates were not the only actors to focus on well-established, mainstream hashtags. All NGOs in our data set also consistently used #dkgreen and #dkpol. Like the candidates, they used these hashtags more frequently than hashtags associated with civil society initiatives. Overall, 18 NGOs and networks mentioned #dkgreen and #dkpol 282 times (87% and 72%, respectively), while they mentioned the hashtags promoted by civil society actors 44 times (a total of 24%). Relying on well-established, mainstream hashtags increased possibilities for visibility, given that more users—not least the traditional legacy media, as we showed earlier—engage with these hashtags.



**Figure 4. Hashtag frequency among NGOs and networks.**

In this way, the potential of the election as a networked opportunity structure was not fulfilled, in the sense that the uptake of hashtags promoted by civil society actors was very limited. However, beyond the use of hashtags, civil society actors' discourses on the climate crisis did seem to be reflected in candidates' tweets. We explore this in more detail in relation to the election as a discursive opportunity structure next.

#### *Discursive Opportunity Structure*

While the use of climate hashtags promoted by civil society actors was infrequent beyond the civil society actors who promoted them, our data do suggest some discursive connections between civil society actors and political candidates, notably through the use of #dkgreen as an empty signifier. However, these were mainly created by civil society actors' retweets of candidates' tweets (the tweet-retweet ratio was 60%). Among both candidates and civil society, tweets that merely used #dkgreen as a signifier empty of meaning and that did not articulate any specific solution or call for action on the climate crisis were prominent. This can be exemplified by a tweet by the candidate for the Socialist People's Party, Ida Auken, in response to the announcement of Greta Thunberg's participation at the climate march in Copenhagen during the election campaign:

Looking forward to hearing Greta Thunberg. Powerful that a young woman can get the attention of an entire world. Don't agree with her that we should panic. But perhaps get something like a war mentality and come together to reach an even bigger climate target #dkpol #dkgreen. (Auken, 2019; our translation)

Here, #dkgreen was used to connect the tweet to other tweets about the climate during the election campaign, but without specifying intentions for action. This vagueness characterized 18% of tweets among civil society tweets and 37% among candidates' tweets. Next, we follow Levy and Spicer's (2013) perspectives on climate imaginaries to show how the issue is articulated in terms of climate apocalypse, technomarket, and sustainable lifestyle.

#### *The Hopeful Climate Apocalypse Imaginary*

Civil society actors' articulation of the election and climate march as an opportunity structure invoked a sense of urgency. This characterized the majority of tweets (19%). This sense of urgency was the second most prominent sensibility in tweets from candidates (30%). In both cases, it can be seen as reflecting what Levy and Spicer (2013) have identified as the climate apocalypse imaginary, which conjures up images of imminent disaster. This was not merely a result of candidates connecting to civil society discourses. Rather, the apocalypse imaginary mainly appeared in tweets about the election poster by political party the Alternative. On the second of the three peak days, with approximately 400 tweets mentioning the climate (see Figure 1), the Alternative revealed its election poster carved in ice. The ice poster showed a relief of the earth accompanied by the words "There is an alternative" (Alternativet, 2019; our translation). Relying on a logic of bearing witness borrowed from social movement tactics (Cammaerts, 2015), the melting poster served to generate attention from legacy media around the urgency of responding to the crisis of the melting poles.



**Figure 5. Tweet showing election poster (Alternativet, 2019).**

However, rather than expressing an entirely dystopian view, the apocalypse imaginary in candidates' tweets was vested with hope, which hinged on the election as an opportunity to bring about the change needed to alleviate the crisis. Again, this was most frequently articulated by the Alternative, especially in the party and its candidates' use of the hashtag #hopeisback (191 times). Hope also appeared in tweets by the Socialist People's Party, such as in this tweet from the leader of the party: "Yes, the green agenda must be at the same level as the economic! They must go hand in hand. And it can be done. There is hope. #dkpol #dkgreen" (Olsen Dyhr, 2019; our translation). In all cases, voting for the party and/or candidate in question tempers dystopia with hope by enabling political action on the climate crisis if the party and/or candidate is elected. The hope that tempers dystopia can also be discerned in tweets that mentioned the climate march, which took place during the election campaign. Underpinned by a logic of numbers also characteristic of wider media logics (Dahlgren, 2009), these tweets placed hope in the climate march as an opportunity to show wide public concern for the urgency of political action through the mobilization of thousands of citizens (Askanius & Uldam, 2011; Harrebye, 2011).



*The Climate Imaginary as Technomarket and Beyond Green Growth*

Only a small portion of tweets articulated the election in terms of green growth and technical solutions (4% of civil society tweets and 4.5% of candidates' tweets). In civil society tweets, this discourse was mainly found in tweets by companies and interest organizations such as Danish Energy. A similar belief can be discerned in tweets from candidates; 26 tweets included the hashtags #dkbiz and #dkgreen. For example, the Conservative People's Party mentioned commercial actors, such as the representative of industrial farming in Denmark, Agriculture & Food, and the flight operator Scandinavian Airlines, as examples of companies "taking responsibility for #dkgreen" with their "green ambitions" (Conservative People's Party, 2019; our translation).



Virksomhed efter virksomhed tager ansvar for #dkgreen .  
 @spisekammeret, @SAS , @Grundfos for bare at nævne  
 nogle med grønne ambitioner. [konservative.dk/klimalov](https://www.konservative.dk/klimalov)  
 #dkpol #fv19

[Translate Tweet](#)



10:13 PM · May 7, 2019 · [Twitter Web Client](#)

1 Retweet 15 Likes

**Figure 6. Companies taking responsibility (Conservative People's Party, 2019).**

This constructs the climate as something for science and technology to fix and business to profit from, presenting a "win-win" scenario (Uldam, 2016; Wright et al., 2013). The technomarket imaginary presupposes that the climate and natural environment are manageable, and that green growth can alleviate

disaster and, without fundamentally compromising lifestyles or economic growth, generate economic growth and a leadership position. A similar imaginary underpins this example from the Social Democratic Party, which stated the party's ambition for "Denmark to once again be a green superpower" (Socialdemokratiet, 2018). This suggestion to counter the climate crisis through green growth, invoked by "green superpower," reflects what Levy and Spicer (2013) have identified as the "carbon compromise" characteristic of the period 1998–2008; this compromise was structured around a gradual transition to a low-carbon economy that does not come at the expense of jobs and economic growth.

However, more prominent than the technomarket imaginary were calls for specific solutions to tackle the climate crisis. They centered on three themes: industrialized farming, taxation on carbon emissions, and nature conservation. Among civil society, these appeared in 9% of tweets. For example, in its tweet, Greenpeace Denmark proposed reducing industrialized farming of cows and pigs by 50%; the tweet was juxtaposed with an image of the harsh reality of industrialized meat production, accompanied by the hashtags #dkgreen and #dkpol. In a country with a long trajectory of industrialized, large-scale farming, this can be seen as a suggestion for wider reform.



**Figure 7. Tweet tagging MP in an opinion piece on the carbon footprint of industrial farming in Denmark (Greenpeace, 2019).**

Among candidates, calls for specific solutions appeared in 26% of tweets, mainly from candidates from the Alternative, but also from the Red–Green Alliance and the Socialist People's Party. Again, industrialized farming, taxation on carbon emissions, and nature conservation were the most frequently mentioned themes.

#### *Sustainable Lifestyle—Hypocrisy or Responsibility?*

Levy and Spicer (2013) identify a sustainable lifestyle climate imaginary as emerging and gaining traction, with more local communities and NGOs working with alternative social and economic organizing based on local, small-scale food production, co-ops, and community services (e.g., in eco-villages and transition towns). In this sense, the sustainable lifestyle climate imaginary remained largely absent in both civil society and candidates' tweets during the election campaign. However, a sustainable lifestyle climate

imaginary did emerge as expressions of individual consumer responsibility in civil society tweets. A relatively small portion of civil society tweets (6%) pointed to the role of individual citizens in contributing to alleviating the climate crisis. These tweets mainly focused on citizens as consumers and, as such, their responsibility to eat organic food and eat less meat. However, 2% of the tweets focused on sustainable lifestyle from a perspective of hypocrisy. These tweets centered on two issues: (1) they accused young people of hypocrisy for calling for climate action and linked to media reporting on trash after a university party, or (2) they accused MPs who advocate green reform of hypocrisy, because they also fly and thus contribute to CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. This focus on sustainable lifestyle was notably absent in candidates' tweets, with the exception of one candidate. Overall, these tweets focused on individual consumer responsibility rather than collective responsibility and reform. In this way, the sustainable lifestyle climate imaginary also encompasses citizens' understanding of their agency strictly as economic consumer agency. This impedes citizens' inclinations to assign responsibility to politicians and to call for policy reform that makes sustainable choices and solutions affordable and attractive on an individual, organizational, and societal level.

Importantly, the fossil fuels forever climate imaginary identified as dominant by Wright and colleagues (2013) was absent in tweets by MP candidates. This is arguably connected to environmental issues and climate change being at the top of the print media agenda during the 2019 national elections in Denmark (see Blach-Ørsten et al., 2020).

### **Concluding Discussion**

In 2009, 10 years before the 2019 national elections in Denmark, research examined the role of social media platforms in enabling civil society to put climate action on the political agenda in relation to the UN Climate Conference in Copenhagen, COP15. Calls for climate justice in public discourse and political protests around climate change were prominent in the run-up to the COP15 in Copenhagen in 2009 (Askanius & Uldam, 2011; Chatterton, Featherstone, & Routledge, 2013). Discursively anchoring the protests on the issue of climate justice, activists at the time were contesting the unequal impacts of climate change. Their contestation centered on the failure of national leaders to adequately address the crisis and its implications in terms of justice. A decade later, during the 2019 general elections in Denmark, with the climate crisis more prevalent in mainstream political discourse than ever, civil society actors once again saw an opportunity to gain visibility for their concerns about climate injustices. A key platform for this was Twitter. However, in contrast to 2009, the grievances voiced by civil society actors on Twitter were largely devoid of antagonism and calls for radical political solutions. Instead, they tried to influence political candidates. In response, candidates from the center toward the left of the political spectrum gave significant visibility to climate issues on Twitter, framing them as an urgent national concern. But as they did so, they largely shifted the conversation from justice, solidarity, and solutions of a more radical and systemic nature to one primarily framing political solutions within the imaginaries of the existing consumer-capitalist system. The data also indicate that on Twitter, unlike in other media, the legacy press and political candidates did not play a prominent role in granting visibility to extra-parliamentarian debates about climate change. Legacy news media did not, in any significant way, take up efforts of civil society actors by mentioning their hashtags. Further, climate-related hashtags were the most frequently used by MP candidates, but this was far from even across the political spectrum. These findings tell us that only to a very limited extent did the mediation opportunity structure of the political event create networked conversations among media, political

candidates, and civil society on this pressing issue. In terms of the online election campaign potentially generating climate imaginaries and new ways of imagining transformation, tweets about climate action focused narrowly on green growth rather than transitions toward degrowth, and only on rare occasions was climate change framed as inherently connected to social and economic justice. Hence, discursive struggles over climate action did not push the boundaries of the existing system, and suggestions about systemic change largely remained confined to civil society conversations.

These findings go beyond a Danish context because they illustrate broader patterns of fragmentation in climate change communication in hybrid media systems, even in political contexts and during periods when the issue is at the top of both the political and media agendas—for example, in Belgium (Harder et al., 2016) and Norway (Enli & Simonsen, 2018).

Further research in this area might address the question of whether more radical calls for action and alternative future imaginaries can be found elsewhere online, but research should also examine the role of Twitter in relation to other platforms in hybrid media systems—not least in the context of election campaigns. Additional studies might also address the extent to which the absence of networked conversations identified in this study is specific to communication about the climate crisis or applies to other major topic areas in contemporary political communication.

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